HISTORICAL MATERIALISM 18

Criticism of Heaven

On Marxism and Theology

Roland Boer

BRILL

Criticism of Heaven

Historical Materialism Book Series

Editorial Board

Paul Blackledge, Leeds – Sébastien Budgen, Paris
Michael Krätke, Amsterdam – Stathis Kouvelakis, London – Marcel van der Linden, Amsterdam
China Miéville, London – Paul Reynolds, Lancashire
Peter Thomas, Amsterdam

VOLUME 18

Criticism of Heaven

On Marxism and Theology

By

Roland Boer

BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2007

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

ISSN 1570-1522
ISBN 978 90 04 16111 5

Copyright 2007 by Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands
Koninklijke Brill NV incorporates the imprints Brill, Hotei Publishing,
IDC Publishers, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers and VSP.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use is granted by Koninklijke Brill NV provided that the appropriate fees are paid directly to The Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Suite 910, Danvers, MA 01923, USA.
Fees are subject to change.

PRINTED IN THE NETHERLANDS

For Ken Surin

Contents

Preface xi
Introduction xv

Chapter One Bloch's Detective Work 1
Argument and advocacy 4
From the Bible to sentence production, and back again 7
Method: class conflict as a hermeneutical key 14
Vagaries of writing 14
Oral and written texts 15
Forces of redaction 17
Biblical criticism 18
The politics of interpretation 20
The critique of myth 26
Exegesis 36
The Hebrew Bible 37
New Testament 45
The return to theology 47
Atheism 48
Teleology 50
Transcendence 51
Faith, hope, sin and death 52
Conclusion 55

Chapter Two Benjamin's Perpetuation of Biblical Myth 57
Trauerspiel 63
Demons, allegory and flesh (allegorical level) 65
Fall and Eschaton (moral and anagogic levels) 67
Passagenarbeit 70
Method: collector as allegorist 70

Passages 72
The double allegory of Marxism and theology 74
Myth and history 79
Appropriation of the maternal function 82
Genesis 86
Language 86
Ursprung 90
Salvation history [*Heilsgeschichte*]: the return of biblical myth 96
Conclusion 103

Chapter Three The Ecclesiastical Eloquence of Louis Althusser 107
Ecclesiastical form: theological writings 109
From absent cause to philosophy of religion 128
The logical necessity 129
Elements of a materialist philosophy of religion 132
Ideology 133
Myth 143
Conclusion: the terminus of (auto)biography? 159

Chapter Four The Heresies of Henri Lefebvre 163
Threshold 164
Exploration 169
Worship 177
Archaeology 178
Heresies 187
Blondel 189
Joachim de Fiore and mysticism 192
Jansen and the Albigensians 194
The Devil 197
On religion: reading Lefebvre against himself 198
Everyday life 200
Space 204
Women 209
Conclusion 214

Chapter Five The Ecumenism of Antonio Gramsci 215
Ecumenism 219
Politics: the 'Eighteenth Brumaire' of the Holy See 228
Catholic Action 228
Internal conflict: integralists, Jesuits and modernists 234
Bewilderment? External alliances 239
Intellectuals 245
Reformation 258
Counter-Reformation and Reformation 260
The Italian Luther 267
Conclusion 273

Chapter Six The Apostasy of Terry Eagleton 275
Wit and the encyclopaedia, or the tensions of style 278
Orthodoxy and orthopraxis 283
Asceticism 285
Evil and the humble virtues 287
The absence of sin, or, the politics of forgiveness 294
Radical christology 301
Theology *redivivus*? 309
The desire for a historical Jesus 313
Christological metaphors 315
The problem of the personality cult 321
An intrinsic Eagleton? (The question of ecclesiology) 324

Chapter Seven The Conversion of Slavoj Žižek 335
The darkness of Lacan: the challenge of Butler and Laclau 338
Of truth-events and sundry matters: the challenge of Badiou 343
Materialist grace? 359
A glimpse 360
The cul-de-sac of ethics and love 364
The Protestant turn 372
Badiou, or militant gratuitousness 372
The grace of V.I. Lenin 377
Kierkegaard's snare 383

Revolutionary grace 387
Conclusion 389

Chapter Eight Adorno's Vacillation 391
Theological suspicion 395
Demythologisation 399
Faith: inwardness and history 402
Christology 409
Sacrifice 412
Cosmology: the spheres 415
Secularised theology 422
Judaism and the ban on images 430
The possibilities of theology 439
Love 440
Grace 442
Conclusion 443

Conclusion 447

References 453

Index of Biblical References 463

General Index 465

Preface

This book grew in the writing. The product of too many long and difficult years, it often sat quietly while I was engaged with other pursuits only to return to this one yet again. For this book brings together two great passions, the Bible and Marxism. My starting point, however, is Marxism itself, and my search is for the way the engagement with theology and the Bible by some of Marxism's greatest exponents is an indispensable part of their work.

I began writing this book in Northmead, Australia and finished it in Sofia, Bulgaria after a train journey with Christina Petterson across Europe from northwest to southeast. On the way we walked through the Jewish quarter and over the Pest hill of Budapest, were thrown off a train at the Romanian border, travelled over incomplete tracks and through half-rebuilt villages in Serbia only to stay at the magnificent Hotel Moskva in Belgrade, home of the Lefebvre archives. Finally we made our way on an ancient train that slowly rocked its way to Sofia. There, in the midst of the ambiguous and troubled imposition of the worst of US-style capitalism, and after Christina returned to Copenhagen, I found a small second-century Christian church within the walls of the presidential palace. Built before the conversion of Constantine, perhaps at the time when the last of the New Testament texts were being written, in fact before the canon of the New Testament itself had been determined, it came as a complete surprise. Now it is, of course, a fascinating and contested site: re-opened once again as an Orthodox church, after some five centuries as a mosque and then, for half a century, neglected under Communist rule, it marks both a futile re-assertion by the church of its lost power and the sheer indifference of most Bulgarians to Christianity or even religion of any sort. Much of what this book covers is or will be contested, fascinating, occasionally well-known but mostly surprising territory. I should say, for those who may harbour some suspicions, that my agenda here is not to uncover or debunk these Marxists by uncovering some badly kept theological

secrets. Rather, given the crucial role of the Bible and theology in their work, we ignore those elements at our peril.

Let me thank those who have been part of the process of the book. Many have been graceful enough to listen to, read and comment on earlier versions of sections of this book – biblical scholars, literary critics, philosophers and other sundry Marxists. In particular, various audiences in Australia, Europe and North America have provided lively feedback to papers that gradually made their way, after many reformulations, into the book. However, the major context has been the Bible and Critical Theory Seminar, perhaps the most important forum for critical biblical studies in Australia today, where a whole wealth of comments and discussions have taken place of various parts of this book. As far as individuals are concerned, I would like to thank Fred Jameson, Ken Surin, Cath Ellis, Deborah Bird Rose, John Docker, Andrew Milner, David Roberts, Kate Rigby, George Aichele, Ed Conrad, Ibrahim Abraham and Peter Thomas, who have discussed and/or read sections of this work. However, the greatest thanks go to Fiona Marantelli and Matt Chrulew, my untiring research assistants who undertook the formidable task of comment, formatting and editing with gusto.

A note on translations: my references are to the existing English translations, mainly because these are easier to find for most. Yet there are many snares in doing so and I have cross-checked every translation with the German and French, altering where necessary. Only with the Italian have I relied wholly on the English translations, for Italian is beyond me. As I know from biblical criticism, translation is always a vexed issue, even though one always benefits from the hard work of others. Apart from the incomplete status of translations, notably with Lefebvre, Althusser's early work, Gramsci's prison notebooks, and some of Bloch, the translations themselves are, as is often pointed out, patchy, with E.B. Ashton's effort on Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* the most woeful of the lot. Fortunately, Robert Hullot-Kentor's work on *Kierkegaard* is one of the examples of how translation should be done; fortunate for me since it is one of the major texts on which I focus in my discussion of Adorno. The situation with Benjamin is perhaps the most uniform and extensive, with recent translations of swathes of texts and the quality is generally quite good. But, even so, what appears to be a reasonably good translation may turn out to have its pitfalls. For instance, J.T. Swann's translation of Bloch's *Atheismus im Christentum* has a knack of leaving out the odd phrase,

sentence or section. What we end up with is in many respects an abridged version. And John Osborne's generally good translation of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book offers some curious, and, for my argument, crucial, glosses, such as the unaccountable translation of *Heilsgeschichte*, salvation history, as 'story of the life of Christ'. Of course, the translations themselves have generated a whole new wave of criticism that demands yet more translations and re-translations, Robert Hullot-Kentor's work with Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* being the most notable. Sometimes, that criticism is somewhat skewed, depending heavily on the choice of which texts to translate, as the history of translations of Lefebvre and Gramsci shows only too clearly.

The Hill, New South Wales
February 2006

Introduction

This is a work of commentary, that venerable and somewhat neglected tradition that emerges from millennia of biblical criticism. I engage intimately with the writings of some of the major Marxist critics of the twentieth century. But the subject matter that draws me in is not what has drawn most of the critical passion, with its concern for the great themes of Marxist criticism. Rather, my commentary picks up the often extended reflections and deliberations over theology and the Bible that we find in these critics. Apart, perhaps, from Walter Benjamin, my surprise is how much theological material there is in their work and how little critics have dealt with it. To my great pleasure, in each case – Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Louis Althusser, Henri Lefebvre, Antonio Gramsci, Terry Eagleton, Slavoj Žižek and Theodor Adorno – I discovered a wealth of material in which to immerse myself.

My purpose here is simply to offer a commentary on the extensive engagements with theology and the Bible by these characters. This calls for detailed readings of certain, oft-neglected works and parts of works. If I imagine a gathering of all eight Marxists, it is hardly a furtive meeting in a gloomy and rubbish-strewn alley, collars up against the rain, surreptitious glances cast over hunched shoulders to ensure that no tail is in sight. Each of them – and this is one of the reasons for their presence here – sits down at midday with the Bible and theology, in full view of passers-by, who happen to be made up of literary critics, philosophers, sociologists and the odd theologian and biblical scholar.

Each of the Marxists I consider is important in contemporary political, cultural and philosophical debates, which is perhaps reason enough to invite them to the table. But, despite their own openness concerning theology and the Bible, their willingness to bare it all in some collective critical confession, others have been far less willing to talk about *this* part of their work. If I asked each of them to bring along a book or essay in which they have written about

theology or religion, but which their critics and commentators have mostly ignored, we will be in for some surprises as the worn volumes emerge from backpacks, satchels, coat-pockets and battered leather brief-cases.

Ernst Bloch, giving the others a messianic stare, produces with a flourish his *Atheism in Christianity* (1972), loudly bemoaning the fact that critics pass by this volume looking askance, preferring his other texts. Louis Althusser, hanging cigarette that is of one with the black circles under his eyes, thrusts forth a fist-full of essays, hastily typed in a frenzy of exhilaration during the high moments of his bipolar state – some of the early theological essays, his famous ideology essay with the Christian 'example' highlighted in red, and the collection of lectures *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* (1990). Henri Lefebvre, with a twinkle in his eye that belies his asthma, draws from his pocket a few 'Notes Written One Sunday in the French Countryside', written in 1947 at his village church in Navarrenx. Soon he would be cursing the 'crucified sun', the Gallic crosses scattered about those same hills that represented for him the Church's systematic stifling of life and joy. The diminutive Antonio Gramsci, silent now after his years in Mussolini's prisons, places on the table the pages concerning the Roman-Catholic Church from his *Prison Notebooks*, content to allow the neat script of these pages to express his fascination with the Church and the lessons it might provide for the communist movement. Sitting close by Lefebvre, Althusser and Gramsci, the last of the Catholic Marxists, Terry Eagleton, makes not a move. He has some books with him, but is reluctant to bring them out. Eventually, one of the others produces a number of slim volumes from his days among the Catholic Left in England, books found in the basement of some library and to which Eagleton resolutely refuses to refer in his later works – *The New Left Church* (1966), *The Body as Language: Outline of a 'New Left' Theology* (1970), the '*Slant*' *Manifesto* (1966) and various essays from the 1960s journal *Slant*. As prolific as Eagleton but much more willing to proffer his works, with an emphatic gesture of his left hand Slavoj Žižek thumps down on the table his theological trilogy – *The Fragile Absolute* (2000), *On Belief* (2001) and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003). Žižek offers to say grace, much to the surprise of everyone else, before Alain Badiou prods him in the ribs. Žižek withdraws the offer, realising that it is hardly of the stature of his rediscovery of the Protestant Reformers' doctrine of grace itself. Finally, the melancholy Theodor Adorno carefully extracts from his leather briefcase his *Habilitation* thesis, *Kierkegaard:*

Construction of the Aesthetic. Everyone at the table knows about this first book in philosophy, but few have read it recently if at all and only a few register that it is in fact a theological work through and through. Adorno, however, encourages a retiring Walter Benjamin, whose work everyone seems to know despite the fact that much of it was unknown when he wrote and even more remained unpublished. Of all those gathered here, Benjamin is the exception, for his engagement with theology and the Bible, from early essays such as 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man' to the final theses on history, is by far the most well-known and most commented upon.

These, then, are the texts, along with one or two others, that are the centre of my critical commentary. At times, this calls for the treatment of vast slabs of text in a synoptic fashion, but, more often than not, I come in for a much closer look, discussing key passages in detail as befits the genre of commentary itself. And my preferred mode of dealing with these texts is to offer, where possible, criticism on the basis of each writer's own methods. Often, this will require hauling in material from elsewhere in their writings, seeking cross-references, comparisons and questions that arise from such comparisons – in short, a mode of reading that comes from the tradition of biblical commentary. For instance, since I feel that Bloch's strategy of the discernment of myth is one of his major contributions, I argue that, at times, he lives up to the method itself and provides some brilliant readings of biblical texts, and yet, at other moments, he falls short of the method's requirements. Or Žižek's identification of the revolutionary potential for the doctrine of grace is one that he realises only fitfully, pursuing all too frequently cul-de-sacs of love and ethics that are diametrically opposed to grace.

This work has some obvious overlaps with the standard Marxist criticisms of religion, usually based on the well-known sentences from the early philosophical manuscripts concerning opium, oppression and flowers, as well as with what has become known as political theology in its European forms (especially Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann) and liberation theology in Latin America and the Third World. My effort at this level differs in a number of ways. The various Marxist theories and criticisms of religion seek to use standard Marxist categories to analyse religion, especially the notion of ideology and class consciousness. The most interesting of these concern themselves with the revolutionary forms of religious thought – Bloch is the major example in this study – such as the Levellers in England or the peasant wars in

Germany under the leadership of Thomas Münzer. By contrast, the fascinating work of liberation theology, which will, in fact, appear in my discussion at various points, comes from the side of theology, causing something of a scandal in the Church when it came to attention in Latin America in the 1970s. And yet, liberation theology sought a conjunction between theology and Marxism, using the insights of Marxist social, economic and political analysis in order to deepen the theological discussions. In attempting to build bridges between Marxism and theology, it conjures up the cafés and conference rooms of the 1970s when the Marxist-Christian dialogue was in full swing in continental Europe, or the furore caused in England with the Catholic Left in the 1960s, or the political theology of German theologians such as Johann Metz. Finally, I am less taken with the more recent efforts to show the theological core of Marxist thought, of which the most sophisticated effort is that of John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*,[1] nor indeed the so-called post-secular theologies of the likes of John Caputo, Jean-Luc Marion or even Jacques Derrida, for these are notable by their avoidance of the distinctly Marxist strain I consider here. All the same, these earlier moves in some way inform what I do here, immersed in them as I have been in various ways for the past two decades, but I should point out that I do not seek a rapprochement between Marxism and theology (as the youthful Althusser and Eagleton sought to do), nor do I want to apply Marxist categories to theology, nor am I interested in pointing out that, beneath the various systems, lies a covert theology.

I have organised this book in three sections or parts – biblical Marxism, Catholic Marxism and the Protestant turn. I begin with those whose primary engagement is with the Bible, namely Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin. Their assimilated Jewish background plays a role here, but it is by no means the only reason for such an interest in the Bible. As for the Catholic Marxists, three of the four worked in dominantly Roman-Catholic cultures (Althusser, Lefebvre and Gramsci), and three of them moved from intense involvement in the Church to Marxism (Althusser, Lefebvre and Eagleton). Finally, there is what I have called the 'Protestant turn'. In Slavoj Žižek, we find a move from a distinctly Roman-Catholic emphasis on ethics to a Protestant concern with grace, particularly in the effort to develop a materialist theory of grace. Lastly,

[1] Milbank 1993. See Boer 1998.

Adorno also appears in this section, for not only is the Lutheran context of Germany significant, but his most sustained theological work engages with the one who is perhaps still the leading Lutheran philosopher, Kierkegaard.

As for the biblical Marxists, the major issues that bind both Bloch and Benjamin to each other are the nature of biblical interpretation, the potential contributions from the Bible to Marxist thought and practice, and the relationship between biblical studies and theology. Yet, their primary focus is the Bible: Bloch is the most enthusiastic, and he urges the importance of the Bible in any revolutionary politics, so I begin with him. Benjamin is much more enigmatic, always evading the efforts to pin him down, slipping out at the moment when we think we have him sorted out. And so he appears guarded, toying with biblical interpretation while drawing from it some fundamental categories for his own thought, albeit problematically.

Thus, in the first chapter, I follow the train of Bloch's enthusiasm, for he is the only Marxist in this book to have written a monograph on the Bible, *Atheism in Christianity*. But the Bible also constitutes, along with Goethe's *Faust*, one of the major inspirations for that endless book, *The Principle of Hope*. There is much that I want to retrieve from Bloch: his infectious language; the subversive potential of the Bible against the Church; his call for a discernment of myths; an effort to deal with the continued appeal of the Bible to revolutionary groups; and a distinctly political exegesis of the Bible. However, in the end, he runs the Bible and theology together, moving from one to the other in a grand sequence: I will argue that the two are by no means on the best of terms and that, at this point, Bloch tends to lose sight of his most useful strategy, the discernment of myth. Although I keep finding myself referring to Bloch, drawing elements from his work for other projects, I would rather that he kept the Bible and theology at least at arm's length.

As for Benjamin, he was enchanted by allegory, saturated as it is with biblical exegesis. Some key essays, 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man', the translation essay, along with 'On Violence', the major texts of *The Origin of the German Mourning Play*, *The Arcades Project* and the final theses 'On the Philosophy of History' all indicate a sustained concern with the Bible and theology. In this chapter, I focus on Benjamin's use of allegory, arguing that it is primarily a theological mode of biblical interpretation. This theological dominance has its most obvious and powerful presence in the way it highlights and extends the deeply mythical dimensions of the Bible, especially

those around creation, the coming of Christ and his return at the end of the age, the Parousia. So Benjamin's attempt to develop categories from the Bible in order to break out of the mythic hell of capitalism paradoxically perpetuates the myth he seeks to escape. His favoured motif of creation and origin in order to speak of the communist break from myth, his use of a 'salvation history' moving from creation to Eschaton, and his reversion to images of procreation and birth when he speaks of the revolutionary break, of origin, creation and the eschatological new world – all of these are signals of the dominance of theological thought in his favoured method, allegory, that perpetuates the deepest myths of the Bible and theology in his work. Still, I will argue that, in his failure, Benjamin provides an insight into the function of myth in relation to utopia.

The second and largest part of the book deals with the small-'c' catholic Marxists. I use the term 'catholic' here in a double sense. Most obviously, Althusser, Lefebvre and Gramsci wrote in environments saturated, culturally, socially and religiously, with Roman Catholicism. The most pervasive mark of such an environment in their work is the way neither theology nor the Bible but the Church dominates their reflections on religion. They deal, in other words, with ecclesiology first and foremost. Eagleton's difference, working in the context of a Roman-Catholic minority in a Protestant England, shows up in his concern for biblical and theological categories. And yet Eagleton's emphases will turn out to be indelibly Roman-Catholic, particularly the focus on ethics and Christ as exemplar. But there is another side to their 'catholicity', namely an inherent tendency to universalise in a particular fashion. Such catholicity shows up clearly in the assumption that the Roman-Catholic Church is the 'Church', but also in the various philosophical and literary arguments that assume a comparable universality.

In the third chapter my major argument is that Althusser's expulsion of the Roman-Catholic Church from his life and work, after a deep commitment to the church, enabled it to permeate all of his work. Not so much a return of the repressed, the Church becomes the absent cause of his philosophy. So I will follow this subterranean presence of the ecclesial, its shortfalls and promises, the possibilities and limitations for Althusser's own thought that such a social, political and theoretical context enables. I organise my discussion in two sections. First, the form of Althusser's rejection of religion is not so much in terms of theology or the Bible, but of the Church with which he had a lingering

connection after many years of involvement and religious commitment. Secondly, I explore the logic within Althusser's arguments for a reconsideration of religion from the perspective of materialist philosophy.

From Althusser, I move to another Frenchman, Henri Lefebvre. My concern in this chapter is Lefebvre's continual negotiation of religion, specifically the strange ghost of Roman Catholicism and catholicity that continues to visit his work. That Lefebvre's comments on religion assume that the Roman-Catholic Church is the norm of religion, that religion in fact means ecclesiology, that the presence of the Church in his work may be designated 'catholicity' in a range of senses, points to the situation of Marxist intellectuals in France in the middle of the twentieth century. For all his earlier fractious commitment, Lefebvre sought to excise the Church from his life and thought, but the vitriol of his rejection speaks more of its continued influence. My discussion of Lefebvre exegetes his late essay from *Critique of Everyday Life* of 1947: 'Notes Written One Sunday in the French Countryside'. In his passionate polemic against the parish church near the Navarrenx of his youth, narrated through an existential tour of the church and then worship, Lefebvre reveals more than he realises concerning the continued hold of the Roman-Catholic Church on his life. From this essay and his predilection for heresies, I extract three key categories of his thought – everyday life, space and women – that might be used for a Marxist theory of religion.

The fifth chapter crosses the Alps to Italy and Antonio Gramsci, whose writings on 'religion', scattered characteristically throughout the *Prison Notebooks*, take on a distinctly ecumenical scent. I read these various notes as an extraordinary example of what a Marxist analysis of religion, or rather Christianity, might look like. The Church leaves its stamp at various places in his writings as he seeks out possibilities for communism and the party, particularly in the four areas on which I focus in this chapter, namely ecumenism, the politics of a global Church, the role of the intellectual, and the possibilities for 'moral and intellectual reform', a phrase he takes directly from his infatuation with the Protestant Reformation of Northern Europe. To begin with, Gramsci's ecumenism shows up most clearly in his interest in the ecumenical movement, and the question of proselytisation. Further, in a complex analysis that rivals Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Gramsci is fascinated by the institutional structure of the Roman-Catholic Church, its political status and machinations, concordats, internal debates, Catholic Action and the

complexities of events in which the Church as the first global movement was a crucial player. In short, the Roman-Catholic Church in Italy shows in relief the intricacies of the Church as a temporal and political institution. Thirdly, the organic or democratic intellectual takes on a different shape in light of his reflections on the Church. His interest in the clergy, the variations from region to region, the transitions from the clergy as a medieval class to a 'caste' of intellectuals, their moral and intellectual work to further the cause of the Church, constitutes a major slice of what he comes to describe as the organic intellectual. Finally, there is his astonishment with the Protestant Reformation: the notion of moral and political reform, a central feature of the programme for a communist revolution, is modelled on that Reformation that took place to the north but did not filter down to the Mediterranean. As one of the only models for social change that worked its way through all levels of society, the transformation the Reformers wrought in Northern Europe, in terms of culture, politics, economics and social organisation, provides a paradigm for communist revolution in Italy and elsewhere.

The final 'catholic' Marxist is Terry Eagleton, coming out of the sectarian and minority position of a Roman-Catholic across the Channel and a world away. For Eagleton there is distinct political mileage in theology itself, rather than the Bible or the Church. The early political theologian of books such as *The New Left Church* (1966), *The Body as Language: Outline of a 'New Left' Theology* (1970), and the *'Slant' Manifesto* (1966) returns belatedly in texts such as *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2003), *The Gatekeeper* (2002) and *Figures of Dissent* (2003). I am interested in three regions of Eagleton's writings: firstly, the transition from the deadly seriousness of his theological texts to the pugnacious wit of his screeds on English literature and politics. Patiently paedagogical, it is still Eagleton, and yet I argue that it has much to do with the content of an apostate theologian. Secondly, the crux of Eagleton's theological recovery in the later works is that Christology has a distinct political dynamic that the Left ignores at its own peril. I find this Christological focus less than helpful, since it exacerbates Marxism's fascination with messianism and the personality cult (here I look forward to Adorno's criticism of the personality cult). Thirdly, there is his deep involvement with the Catholic Left of the 1960s and 70s. This very public controversy in the British Roman-Catholic Church and outside it is something that Eagleton rarely if ever acknowledges, and I argue that his late notion of autotelism also enables him to cover his tracks.

Two Marxists exhibit what I want to call the 'Protestant turn'. Slavoj Žižek moves from a distinctly Roman-Catholic position, with its emphasis on good works, the law and love-as-ethics, to a Protestant emphasis on grace. This comes belatedly, with many byroads, and then only under the heavy influence of Alain Badiou. Adorno joins Žižek in a strange conjunction: coming from the Lutheran-saturated situation of Germany, Adorno's major theological text was an engagement with perhaps the premier Lutheran philosopher, Kierkegaard. However, even Adorno's most Jewish notion, the ban on images that he made a philosophical principle, is also a very a thoroughly Protestant motif. Yet it is the implicit emphasis on grace, as well as the deep iconoclasm that renders Adorno a Marxist of the Protestant turn.

As for Žizek, my major argument is that he can emerge as a Leninist, that is, as a distinct political thinker, only by means of Paul in the New Testament. For Paul enables Žižek to get out of the closed circuit of Lacan's psychoanalysis, particularly in response to the criticisms of both Judith Butler and Badiou. Or rather, it is only via Alain Badiou's deeply Reformed reading of Paul that Žižek is able to break, however partially and with profound angst, from his Lacanian basis. I begin by focusing on the dialogues with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau in order to show how Žižek juxtaposes Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis in a first effort to become a political writer. Subsequently, I offer a close reading of Žižek's engagement with Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999), where Žižek seeks to answer Badiou's charge that psychoanalysis cannot give us any political position. While Žižek initially attempts to answer the charge in psychoanalytic terms, by the time of *The Fragile Absolute* (2000), he changes direction and moves through Paul to a more distinctly political position. However, he is still caught within the Roman-Catholic binds of love-as-ethics and good works, having missed Badiou's emphasis on the search for a materialist notion of grace. Eventually, in *On Belief* (2001), he makes the Protestant turn, carried through in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003). In effect, he finally realises Badiou's point, undergoes his own Reformation and focuses on grace.

Finally, I turn to Adorno, with whom I remain deeply enamoured and yet whom I take to task most consistently. One of the most neglected areas of Adorno criticism is his engagement with theology, and so what I do here is bravely venture into what is widely agreed to be one of his densest texts, the *Habilitation* thesis and first philosophical work on Kierkegaard. And, from

this text, I draw two key categories, namely theological suspicion and the closely related criticism of secularised theology that saturates the work of all the other Marxists I consider in this book. These points require a close reading of *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, for which I make no apology. But I also find that the attempt at a thorough demolition job on Kierkegaard goes too far, that Adorno's effort to show how Kierkegaard's philosophy fails under the weight of its theological and mythical paradoxes falls short precisely where he refuses to say anything positive concerning theology. I close my discussion of Adorno by pushing him to say what is implicit in his writing but what he refuses to say himself – that love must be a radically collective practice if it is to offer reconciliation (drawing on his little known essay 'Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love'), and the possibilities of grace as 'undeserved salvation'.

Chapter One

Bloch's Detective Work

> Implicit in Marxism – as the leap from the Kingdom of Necessity to that of Freedom – there lies the whole so subversive and un-static heritage of the Bible.... So far as it is, in the end, possible to read the Bible with the eyes of the Communist Manifesto.[1]

The first of the biblical Marxists, Ernst Bloch offers more than any would-be investigator of the intersection between Marxism and the Bible, as well as theology, might want. One of a collection of European Marxists noted for longevity, exiled in the US during the Nazi era and then opting to live in West Germany after the building of the Berlin Wall, Bloch came to Marxism after his interests in mysticism and expressionism. In fact, Bloch has been a figure of continued interest for theologians, particularly in light of his readings of major figures in the tradition of European Christianity, such as Augustine of Hippo and Joachim of Fiore, let alone his engagement with the great flowering of biblical studies and theology in Germany in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, the first translations of Bloch's work into English were enabled by the theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Harvey Cox, specifically the

[1] Bloch 1972, p. 69; Bloch 1985, p. 98.

compilation of various excerpts and essays *Man on His Own: Essays on the Philosophy of Religion*. *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom* followed in translation soon afterwards. This comes as no surprise, since, as Tom Moylan shows, Bloch's work had a profound effect on a range of theologians, including various liberal theologians (the death-of-God, developmental and secular theologians), as well as political theology in Germany (Jürgen Moltmann and Johann Metz) and liberation theology (Gustavo Gutiérrez, Franz Hinkelammert and others) in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these theological responses came during the revolutionary turmoil of 1968 and afterwards.[2] In fact, Moylan argues that political and liberation theologies acted to pass Bloch's work, preserved and transformed, into other areas of political and philosophical work such as postcolonialism.

In the critical literature, Bloch's use of the Bible has been less of a focus.[3] Indeed, for Bloch, communism was all the poorer for not studying and considering the Bible. In fact, along with Marx and Goethe, particularly his *Faust*, the Bible forms the major inspiration in Bloch's work.[4] It has, he argues, a strange ubiquity that speaks to all people across vast times and spaces.[5] Not only is Bloch's breathtaking enthusiasm for the Bible something that draws me in to his writing, but I am also intrigued by his advocacy that Marxists study the Bible not only so as to grasp the thought-world of so many peasants and workers who were part of the struggles for communism, nor even that

---

[2] Moylan 1997. Moylan's work is interested in the way political and liberation theologies have received and questioned Bloch's writings. My interest, although obviously related, is quite distinct, focusing on the intersections between the Bible and theology. (See Capps 1968a; Capps 1968b; Cox 1968; Fiorenza 1968a; Fiorenza 1968b; Fiorenza 1969; Heinitz 1968; Metz 1968a; Metz 1968b; Metz 1976; Moltmann 1968; Moltmann 1982; Pannenberg 1968; Tillich 1965.) The volume of *Cross Currents* in which many of these essays appear also contains a short excerpt from Bloch himself (Bloch 1968).

[3] Thus, the various monographs on Bloch deal with his biblical reflections in a minor register, if at all. See, for instance: Jones 1995; Hudson 1982; Geoghegan 1996. Jameson's essay in Jameson 1971 relates Bloch's programme to medieval biblical exegesis in which the four levels of allegory became a strategy for incorporating non-Christian elements into Christianity: in the same way, Bloch's work draws a whole and disparate range of items into his philosophy and hermeneutics of utopia. And yet, Jameson neglects to mention *Atheism in Christianity*.

[4] 'The Bible on the one hand, and the humanist principles of Marx's theory on the other, thus form together the two fundamental cornerstones of Bloch's utopian vision.' Levy 1997, p. 180.

[5] Bloch 1972, pp. 21–4; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, pp. 42–5.

there 'is certainly no German *culture* without the Bible',[6] but also to see the revolutionary potential within the Bible itself.

So, it seems useful to explore a little further the ways in which the Bible's cadences may be heard in Bloch's texts. I will run with the wind for a while, tracing closely Bloch's use of the Bible, during which I ask precisely what is happening when he interprets the Bible and why he would want to do so in the first place. The challenge from Marxists like Bloch is that they read the Bible, not with an agenda of ridicule or unmasking (characteristic more now of those who have moved beyond the Church and still associate the Bible with the Church), but with enthusiasm as a central piece of literature. The urgent question that arises from Bloch's work is precisely why Marxist atheists like him should be interested in the Bible, and why he should wish to reclaim it as a document crucial to Marxism's own wellbeing and survival.

However, in what will turn out to be a central aspect of my discussion of both biblical Marxists, Bloch and Benjamin, I argue for a necessary distinction between theology and the Bible, particularly as the two are so often conflated. For the Bible is not necessarily a text that must be read with a theological agenda, although that has been the default position. However, if we understand the Bible as a disparate and unruly collection of texts that has been subdued and brought into line with ecclesiastical requirements, then its break with theology is a little clearer. This uneasy relationship, with the Bible and theology often at loggerheads with each other, is precisely what I want to highlight in my reading of Bloch. In fact, Bloch's best insights into the Bible come when he takes the Bible as the Church's bad conscience.

Given that, Bloch is in the unique situation of having written a monograph on the Bible itself – *Atheism in Christianity* – and I read this text alongside his magnum opus, *The Principle of Hope*. Others also appear, such as the collection in *Literary Essays* and *Spirit of Utopia*.[7] My reading often runs close to the text, but I perpetually fill in the context, especially in biblical studies, in order to

---

[6] Bloch 1991, p. 46; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, pp. 51–2.

[7] In light of the central role of *Atheism in Christianity*, which is in many respects Bloch's complete statement on the Bible, and due to space, I have not offered a detailed reading here of the early *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*, first published in 1921, and then reprinted in Volume 2 of the *Werkausgabe* in 1985. In this work Bloch seeks to reconstruct Münzer's life and then provide the main elements of his preaching and theology, especially the criticisms of Calvin, Luther and Roman Catholicism in light of their compromise with the world. It is, however, the subject of a subsequent study.

subject Bloch to critique. In *Atheism in Christianity*, which should be read as an introduction to a Marxist-utopian interpretation of the Bible, Bloch shows that he is fully conversant with the high moment of German biblical scholarship in the early twentieth century. But he also offers a critique that comes out of his Marxist background.

In the end, he argues that there is a consistent theme of rebellion against Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible and God of the New Testament. Not so much a moral atheism that refuses to believe in God on theodicical grounds, but a political atheism that sees an internal logic to the Bible in political revolution against God that can only be realised, not with a refusal to believe in God, but with a rebellion against God. I explore the implications of this central argument as I proceed, for over against a plea for the consideration or appropriation of religious, or more specifically Christian, texts and ideas into Marxism, Bloch argues that the internal logic of the Bible leads us to Marxism itself. Apart from the specific question as to how much influence the Bible has on Bloch's thought, especially in the light of his avowed atheism, I am also interested in the deeper issue of whether the Bible itself, now a very unpopular text in so many quarters, is inseparable from the construction of a Marxist philosophy like Bloch's. In the end, though, I wonder whether Bloch's biblical criticism is still not too heavily influenced by theology, however he may try to free it from that theology.

Argument and advocacy

Marxism and religion – largely the Christian tradition of Europe – have rarely been even the remotest of friends. The mutual suspicion of an irreducible atheism on one side and complicity with the rulers of this world on the other have not helped matters. Thus, Bloch's reading of the Bible itself must involve a dual advocacy: Marxists need to take the Bible seriously as a revolutionary document, and biblical scholars and theologians cannot avoid Marxism in their interpretation. I have no trouble with the second side of the equation, in fact I have argued precisely the same for some time now, but I am less than keen on the first, as will become clear as I proceed.

Two moments in *Atheism in Christianity* give voice to the double-front of Bloch's struggle: an explicit apology for the Bible directed at Marxism; and then a call for a common front against the institutionalised forms of religion,

a call that has its main appeal to Christians. Let me begin with the first, which seeks to counter the Marxist rejection of the Bible. For Bloch, an Enlightenment that rejected the Bible was more often a pseudo-enlightenment – the path of such a rejection led as easily to bourgeois rationalism as it did to Nazi neo-paganism and sociobiologism. For Marxists, Bloch argues, the Bible is a document that should not readily be discarded, since it is the Book of the peasants and workers who formed the base of the communist revolution.

Above all, however, it has revolutionary power. Thus, even the possibilities for appropriation by the rich and powerful, even the stretches of text that give justification for oppression, run over and counter to a subversive and questioning deeper stratum. In the end, the revolutionary peasants and oppressed classes have a better sense of what the Bible is about: their reading, in other words, is less a subsequent appropriation and more of an appreciation of the utopian nature of the stories themselves.

Bloch's point is that the 'Bible speaks with special directness to the ordinary and unimportant'.[8] Despite its ambiguity, the Bible is the priests' bad conscience, condemning the way religious professionals have used it. Bloch claims a heritage of the Bible's revolutionary potential for Marxism from the peasant wars in Germany, France, Italy and England (the descendants of these peasants ensured the success of Marxism in Eastern Europe and the USSR). In fact, such a revolutionary tradition, in which human beings are by no means effaced before God, comes through in mysticism as well, the work of Meister Eckhart, along with Bloch's favoured Joachim of Fiore and the Hussites.[9] However, when it is used for oppression, when it is 'often a scandal to the poor and not always a folly to the rich',[10] then the texts interpolated by authority come into play. In the end, Bloch plays a double game here, for while he recognises the contradictions and class conflict in the text and its use, he is determined to find deep within the Bible a restless, expectant utopian stream.

But, along with Marxists, those who assume the Bible to be their own – believers and the Church – also need some persuading.[11] The Bible's resolute critique of clericalism, of the various compacts with wealth and power, must

---

[8] Bloch 1972, p. 24; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 53.
[9] See Bloch 1972, pp. 64–5; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, pp. 93–4.
[10] Bloch 1972, p. 25; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 53.
[11] Bloch 1972, pp. 58–63; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, pp. 87–92.

remain. For the Church, as an institution of power, cannot but be part of the status quo. In fact, by stressing textual and historical conditions, he argues that Marx's famous criticism of religion in the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* is directed more at the Church and its ideological function. As far as religion is concerned, Marx was much more ambivalent, the well-known opium reference also allowing religion a role as the expression of misery and suffering and as protest against it. This point is so wellworn that it hardly requires comment any longer, although it is worth the imaginative leap to the freshness of an observation well after it has become tired and foot-sore. For Bloch, the only way forward is a common front between Marxists and Christians, for 'conversations between believers purged of ideology and unbelievers purged of taboo'.[12]

Atheism and Christianity may well be read as part of this conversation, attempting to persuade two audiences Bloch would rather see together. These days, there is a distinctly hoary feel about such efforts at Marxist-Christian dialogue, belonging more to the sixties and seventies when the Eastern Bloc still existed and the Churches sought a way towards tolerance and accommodation. After an intense interest in Germany and the USA in the 1970s, *Atheism in Christianity* has led something of a half-life in theology and biblical studies, the source of some key hermeneutical ideas that have forgotten their point of origin. I think here of the hermeneutics of suspicion and recovery, elaborated in his own way by Paul Ricoeur and then adopted by ecclesiastical feminism, liberation theology and political theologies in various reform programmes. Yet in the process of this adaptation, Bloch's central critique was lost: that the Bible and Christianity in general are inherently atheistic, that the contradictions within the institutions and its ideologies cannot but unravel. However, it seems to me that the time for the dialogue in which Bloch engages may indeed be now or at some time in the future, for its possibility is greater with the fading away of the old ideological blocs of the Cold War and the need to combat a renewed onslaught of capitalism. For Bloch, like Lenin, wants no Marxist fellow-travellers, a 'half-grown centaur with two body parts, Church and Party, joined only in "perpetual dialog"',[13] but, rather, a genuinely disil-

[12] Bloch 1972, pp. 62–3; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 92.
[13] Bloch 1972, p. 237; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 314; translation modified.

lusioned godlessness that comes face to face with the irrepressibly rebellious biblical texts.

From the Bible to sentence production, and back again

As for my closer reading of Bloch's texts, I begin with sentence production, for it is Bloch's style that says as much about his engagement with the Bible as his sustained exegetical labours. While most work on Bloch has preferred to speak of his utopian hermeneutics, I have always found useful one of Fredric Jameson's strategies, itself drawn from Adorno, which is to tarry with sentence production itself, to treat carefully the craft of creating a text.

Atheism in Christianity turns out to be one mode of Bloch's dealing with the Bible; the full range is found in *The Principle of Hope*.[14] There are four such modes: most obviously there is the explicit consideration of the Bible, especially themes such as Paradise, Eden, Exodus or the new Jerusalem. *Atheism in Christianity* is then the most extensive form of this mode. Characteristically, Bloch rarely refers directly to secondary literature, but, in both works, he shows more than a dilettante's interest in the major issues of debate in biblical studies. Secondly, there are continual references to ideas, texts and biblical figures in other discussions; that is, biblical texts become part of the fabric of a larger argument. Thirdly, we find a series of allusions and passing references. Finally, there are the deeper patterns in Bloch's thought, the basic ideas upon which he builds his work. All four categories show the Bible working in Bloch's thought in a way that is formative of his whole agenda.

Let me begin with the second mode, where the Bible appears as one item in larger discussions, used as an example, or as evidence for certain beliefs and practices, or as a crucial piece of something else. For instance, in a discussion of the attractions of the stars as a counter-utopia to death, Bloch refers in passing to the book of Job 31: 26–7 where the seduction of the heavenly

[14] Bloch's biblical interpretation itself can also be seen as a specific moment in the much wider programme that may be distinguished in terms of a hermeneutics, philosophy and aesthetics of utopia. The first two categories are common in the secondary research on Bloch but the third, a utopian aesthetics, is the argument of Arno Münster. The key documents here are *The Spirit of Utopia* (Bloch 2000) with its focus on music and expressionism; so also *Heritage of Our Times* (Bloch 1991) and the role of aesthetics in *Principle of Hope* (Bloch 1995). See Münster 1985.

bodies for worship is noted.[15] A more substantial example is the tracing of death consciousness and a wishful consciousness of anti-death in Brahms's *German Requiem*, where Hebrews 13: 14 – 'For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come' – is the basis of the first movement and Isaiah 51: 11 – 'Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion; and everlasting joy shall be upon their heads' – the basis of the second (1 Corinthians 15: 51–2 also appears). Bloch reads this, with its robust core in a music of annihilation, as one of the 'musical initiations into the truth of Utopia'.[16] Indeed, it might be argued that it is precisely the biblical content that turns the *German Requiem* into a utopian initiation. *The Principle of Hope* is full of these types of biblical references, explicit parts of a larger argument, although they also appear in other places such as the *Literary Essays* and *Natural Law and Human Dignity*.[17]

Closely related, but less substantial, are the allusions and passing references. Time and again, an allusion appears with no explicit reference to the Bible, merely a word or two that conjures up a text, well-known or not. Incognito, it enters into the very structure of Bloch's vocabulary, syntax and thought.

Out of this plethora of biblical allusions,[18] I focus on two. Firstly, his discussion of natural right alludes both to Jesus and paradise, including a saying of Jesus in Luke 12: 14:

---

[15] Bloch 1995, p. 1150; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1353.

[16] Bloch 1995, p. 1100; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1293.

[17] Other examples include the biblical references in the discussion of the 'cryptic collective' and Christ-like utopia of marriage (Bloch 1995, pp. 330–1; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 384–5), the gradual suppression of dance from the Bible onwards (Bloch 1995, pp. 401–2; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 465–6), the task and suffering of the Jews in history (Bloch 1995, pp. 609–10; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 711–12), the world-creator as modeller and architect, taken from Egypt to Israel and then to the idea of the new heaven (Bloch 1995, pp. 730–3, 776; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 855–8, 908–9), the model of Mary and Martha for quietude and activity (Bloch 1995, pp. 953–6; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 1119–23), communion and baptism, in gnostic circles, as keys of the journey to heaven (Bloch 1995, pp. 1116–7; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 1312–13), the temptation of Jesus by Satan on the mountain in a discussion of the Alps (Bloch 1998, p. 437; Bloch 1985, Volume 9, p. 493), the use of the Decalogue in Thomas Aquinas's formulation of natural law (Bloch 1986, p. 24; Bloch 1985, Volume 6, p. 37), the role of the Fall and the divine legislator more generally in natural-law theory (Bloch 1986, pp. 36–9, 53; Bloch 1985, Volume 6, pp. 50–3, 68), the use of the Joseph's recognition of his brothers in Egypt as an example of *anagnorisis* and, as an example of great moments that pass unnoticed, the conversation between a friend and an aged Pilate who forgets about his contact with Jesus of Nazareth (Bloch 1998, p. 197; Bloch 1985, Volume 9, p. 220).

[18] For instance, biblical epigrams stand side by side with those from Marx, Yeats, Feuerbach, and Bloch himself (see Bloch 1995, p. 1183; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1392).

> As a whole, justice (*Recht*) is a topic much closer to the class society than utopia is, and there is certainly no Christian, let alone chiliastic utopia in justice. Jesus expressly denies that it is his job to administer justice (Luke 12, 14), and the vernacular retains the old saying 'Men of law (*Recht*) – Christians poor'. And only the Natural Right (*Naturrecht*) of the sects, i.e. that which was not legally implemented, by going back to the primal state of paradise as a standard, kept aloof from amalgamation with the law of property, the law of bonds, debt, punishment and the like.[19]

Secondly, and more significant for its doubling over between the Bible and Marx, when he speaks of the road to utopia – Bloch's code word for socialism – his language is permeated with both the Bible and Goethe's *Faust*: the road to the abolition of deprivation, which is itself socialism (not its goal), is also 'the road which first leads to the treasures where moth and dust doth

---

Biblical phrases appear in the flow of another point to be made, as in the reference to 'honour and the hoary head' of Leviticus 19: 32 in a discussion that signals a greater role for old age in socialist societies; or, Psalm 127: 2 – 'the suspect god who gives to his beloved in sleep' writes Bloch, alluding to the Psalm's 'he provides for his beloved in sleep' – is a passing phrase in the discussion of daydreams. And then there is the allusion to the 'wise virgin' of the parable (Matthew 25: 1–13), who, in the confidence of the expectant intention 'in going into the chamber of the bridegroom, offers up as well as gives up her intention' (Bloch 1995, p. 112; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 127). The allusions run on, almost endlessly: Uriah the Hittite (Bloch 1986, p. 257; Bloch 1985, Volume 6; Bloch 1985, Volume 6, p. 290), Joseph and his brothers (Bloch 1995, p. 160; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 183), the mother-image in Isis-Mary (Bloch 1995, p. 172; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 197), the iconoclasm of the first commandment in Exodus 20: 4 (Bloch 1995, p. 212; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 244–5), the absorption of the individual into the Totum of making all things new in Revelation 21:5, and of the drive in religious art that this brings (Bloch 1995, pp. 215, 221; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 248, 255), the saying on salt's savour in Luke 14: 34 in relation to Marx's criticism of Feuerbach (Bloch 1995, p. 274; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 318), in opposition to there being 'nothing new under the sun', Ecclesiastes 1: 9 (Bloch 1995, 288; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 335), Nero and Hitler not as the furthering of history, but an aberration as the 'dragon of the final abyss', from Revelation 12–13 (Bloch 1995, p. 310; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 362), an allusion to Faust and John 1: 1 (Bloch 1995, p. 313: Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 364), the traditional end to German fairytales – 'still alive to this day' – is based on an Old Testament form of ending tales (Bloch 1995, p. 353; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 410), carvings of Adam and Eve in the Baroque garden, which itself has hints of the Song of Songs not mentioned directly by Bloch (Bloch 1995, p. 388; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 450), the play on Daniel 5: 27 (Bloch 1995, p. 402; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 466), the play on the Lord's prayer: 'give us this day our daily illusion', Matthew 6: 11 (Bloch 1995, p. 446; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 518), the 'supreme principle of Christianity' in Owen (Bloch 1995, pp. 560–1; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 652–4), in Saint-Simon's last work 'New Christianity' (1825), he remarks on the combination of sacred socialism and a profane Vatican, and on and on and on.

[19] Bloch 1995, p. 542; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 630.

corrupt, and only then to those which stay awhile'. The allusions here are to Matthew 6: 19–21[20] and *Faust*, Part I, 1700: 'Stay awhile, you are so fair'. And, as if to pick a recurring motif, at the end of the discussion of Brahms, Bloch writes: 'In the darkness of this music gleam the treasures which will not be corrupted by moth and rust, the lasting treasures in which will and goal, hope and its content, virtue and happiness as in a world without frustration, as in the highest good: – *the requiem circles the secret landscape of the highest good*'.[21] Of course, this is a double allusion, both to a saying in the Gospels and to Marx:

> The less you eat, drink and buy books the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorise, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you *save* – the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor rust will devour – your *capital*. The less you *are*, the less you express your own life, the more you *have*, i.e., the greater is your *alienated* life, the greater is the store of your estranged being.[22]

It is where the language takes on such a biblical feel without explicit references that we get closest to the function of the Bible in Bloch's conceptual structure. Like Johann Peter Hebel and Jeremias Gotthelf, whom he critically admired, he sought a 'Bible-educated, Bible-infused style' 'illuminated by the sun of biblical German'.[23] Indeed, some of the deepest currents in Bloch's work – most obviously the utopian – could not have been thought in the first place without the Bible.

Bloch teases us with extraordinary statements, such as that both the 'Novum' – 'the eschatological conscience that came into the world through the Bible'– and 'Ultimum', central categories in Bloch's philosophy, find their earliest expression in the Bible.[24] The Bible provides the source of the 'total expansion of hope that we find in humanism', it is the 'basic manual of hope',

---

[20] 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matt 6: 19–21).

[21] Bloch 1995, p. 1101; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1294; see also Bloch 1995, p. 1181; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1390.

[22] Marx 1975, p. 309.

[23] Bloch 1998, p. 323; Bloch 1985, Volume 9, pp. 367–8.

[24] Bloch 1995, p. 221; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 254.

but also the sources of the 'consciousness of evil' and the 'concept of hazard'.[25] Reading Bloch is rarely tedious, and we soon find a collection of delectable phrases that mark his love of and saturation by the Bible. So he speaks of the 'socialist wealth' of the Bible (Isaiah 55: 1), of the 'original model of the pacified International'[26] and the 'communism based on love'.[27] Then there is the mindfulness of utopia itself: 'The highest conscientiousness of this mindfulness is set down in the words of the psalm: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning"'.[28] But perhaps the most striking of all, and the motivation for my whole project in the first place is this: 'Implicit in Marxism – as the leap from the Kingdom of Necessity to that of Freedom – there lies the whole so subversive and un-static heritage of the Bible'.[29] Bloch's system, then, is unthinkable without the Bible.

For there is an extraordinary charge in reading Bloch. His style has always been a source of delight and consternation, often incomplete, missing the various elements of the more conventional sentences (most notably the verb), declaratory when speaking of the most ephemeral of matters and tentative where the ground is firmer. There are thoughts and ideas thrown forward full of suggestion and promise; the longer sentences in which he juxtaposes two or more ideas or metaphors; and then the impossibly long paragraphs that run on for pages. The style is energetic, allusive. The absence of footnotes, the incomplete in-text references add to this, but it is the almost ecstatic, prophetic feel of the sentences, the heavy use of Latin and Greek terms, and the conscious effort to generate a style that is distinctive. More specifically, along with the expressionist presence, there is a prophetic and poetic feel to Bloch's sentences, paragraphs and discourse, one that seeks not only to speak with the urgency of prophetic voices but also the encyclopaedic allusiveness of Goethe's poetry. It seems to me that Bloch sought, by means of style itself, to allow what he called the 'spirit of utopia' to speak, to create a new way of writing through which the utopian would emerge.

---

[25] Bloch 1970, p. 116.
[26] Bloch 1995, p. 498; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 578 on Isaiah 2: 4; Micah 4: 3–4; see also Bloch 1995, p. 501; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 581.
[27] Bloch 1995, p. 497; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 577.
[28] Bloch 1995, p. 189; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 216.
[29] Bloch 1972, p. 69; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 98.

I want to suggest, then, that Bloch's sentences have a distinctly biblical cadence about them, a feeling for the hints and glimmers of the future. It is not just that he wrote extensively about the Bible, or that it is a crucial item in discussions of major trends in music or in architecture, or even that he alludes to it time and again – although these are themselves important – but that the vocabulary and structure of the sentences and paragraphs show a consistent reading of the Bible for many years, an intimate knowledge of its texts and ways of writing. Bloch takes these up and seeks the potential for his own German.

The distinct pleasure in the style, an almost utopian charge in the syntax itself tempts me to apply the comment to Bloch that Terry Eagleton first used for Jameson, namely, that he would have the oppressive pleasure of knowing that his works will be read in some future, postcapitalist society. For it is not so much the impossibility of socialism that afflicts us in these days of rampant capitalism, but, rather, the fear among the most ardent advocates of capitalism that it will by no means be the last socio-economic formation under which humans live and thrive. It seems to me that Bloch always presses on in the very structure of his prose to this postcapitalist moment, especially since he caught a glimmer in the communism of Eastern Europe. For utopia is not merely hard work but also an extraordinary pleasure, an intense charge of which we can find moments now but not the continuity it should have. This is what Bloch's prose provides – a glimmer of such a perpetual pleasure. For instance:

> In tendency it [order] is inscribed within it [the material], so that chaos, which is not or does not remain such, itself holds latent within it the star and the star and the star-figure. Common to the manifestations of freedom is the desire not to be determined by something alien to or alienated from the will: but common to order is the value of builtness, the elapsion in need of no emotion any more. It is this element of release and of having found its place, indeed this realm-like element, which in other worlds lying less in wickedness [1 John 5: 19] than the political one indicates best repose and indicates it as the best; as in Giotto, as in Bach.[30]

[30] Bloch 1995, p. 533; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 619.

But style also merges into the content. In a characteristically aphoristic fashion, a new section will begin tangentially, subjectively. And so on the first pages, entitled 'Round the Corner',[31] the point that the sly irony of subversive slave talk is found above all in the Bible emerges slowly and only after the style has made all the preparations:

> Remorse alone does not bring maturity, above all when the conscience that pricks still does so childishly, still according to custom, but in a slightly different way. The voice still comes from outside, from above – 'the One above,' so often suspiciously at ease. Thou shalt be still: this downward, exclusively downward cry from above, against too many demands from below, looks exactly like the well-disguised, indeed apparently good slogan that one should not covet one's neighbour's goods, or that even the Jews are now men once more. And it has the same purpose.[32]

But, by the time the major point does appear – that the Bible has a lesson or two to teach in the subtle ironies of subversive slave-talk – the tangential and allusive style has prepared the way.[33] Certain phrases, small hints, also work their way in through the reading process: in the text quoted, the lack of identification of 'the One above' suggests an elision between God and rulers, and the demands and protests are directed at both. A biblical allusion – 'one should not covet one's neighbours goods' – and the mention of the Jews cease to be floating phrases and start to link together in a theme that Bloch will pursue throughout the book.

And so I come to content as well, especially that of *Atheism in Christianity*. I have, in fact, left one of the four modes of engagement with the Bible aside until now. If I have spoken of direct references in larger discussions, allusions and the deeper patterns of Bloch's thought, then I have neglected the central category of his extended reflections on the Bible. And I will focus on that text, and the elements that draw my attention are the question of method, the critique of theology, the three foci of Exodus, Christ and the Soul, and his final argument about the atheistic logic of the Bible and Christianity.

---

[31] Bloch 1972, pp. 13–15; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, pp. 29–31.
[32] Bloch 1972, p. 13; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 29.
[33] Bloch 1972, p. 15; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 31.

Method: class conflict as a hermeneutical key

The most intriguing section of *Atheism in Christianity* is the one before Bloch dives into the biblical texts, one that draws out the political implications of critical biblical scholarship at that time. This scholarship is nothing other than the great, initially German, enterprise of historical-critical biblical studies that came to a slow dominance from the middle of the nineteenth century and is now in an equally reluctant decline. For Bloch, however, such biblical criticism is detective work, one that operates in five zones that I will unfold as I proceed. Yet, I find myself providing a background to Bloch's text, a context within biblical criticism for his own comments on the discipline.

Vagaries of writing

Bloch is no slouch in regard to biblical criticism, for the first three items in his investigation of biblical criticism as detective work – vagaries of writing, oral and written texts, and forces of redaction – relate directly to the biblical sub-disciplines of source, form and redaction criticism. Concerned respectively with literary sources, oral tradition and genre and the editorial process of putting the various texts in the Bible together, the three approaches formed the core of what became known as historical criticism or simply critical biblical scholarship. The drive behind historical criticism was twofold: the reconstruction of the Bible's literary history from the first oral units to the final form of the text, and the use of the Bible as evidence, however slippery, for the reconstruction of Israel and early Christianity's history.

In many respects, Bloch is indebted to what was at first regarded as a threat to faith until its co-option within the ecclesial system. However, I will argue that there is an internal theological logic to historical criticism that has ramifications for Bloch's own use. Further, his appropriation unavoidably takes up some major assumptions of biblical criticism, particularly in terms of its deeper drives to literary and political history that I will also want to question. Yet what interests me is the way Bloch encounters historical criticism and how he develops it. Thus, on the question of writing – source criticism – he begins: 'There is nothing that cannot be changed somehow, for better or worse'.[34] For it is precisely the changes, the various overlays and efforts to adapt texts that

[34] Bloch 1972, p. 69; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 98.

show the seams and contradictions on which biblical criticism fixes. These problems have been noticed ever since the text began to be studied. But the questions and methods with which interpreters came to the text – for instance, medieval allegorical exegesis or the Reformers' theological drive to literal – have varied, and it was the new questions of literary sources and historical formation, derived from wider practices in philology and literary criticism, that led biblical historical criticism forward. Now the seams and contradictions pointed to various written sources behind the final text – most famously the four sources (JEPD, the Yahwist, Elohist, Priestly and Deuteronomistic sources) in the Pentateuch or Torah – a theory that provided a new explanation for the nature of the text.

Apart from the detective work required to unearth such sources, Bloch is interested in the political, rather than merely theological, reasons for the origins and subsequent adaptations of these sources. And so, he traces two ways in which these sources are altered. First, 'each change in the text should keep whatever was good and make it better and clearer, not pervert it'.[35] This is alteration without distortion, something of an ideal that just cannot apply with a text so ideologically loaded. Thus, secondly, once appropriated in another text the author's voice of the original source becomes suppressed and falsified. Here, Bloch sees the value of biblical detective work, a search for the distorted voice. But, by now, he has already made a shift, for he is interested not only in the conventional sources uncovered by biblical criticism, but even more the repressed sources that express subversive politics, one that sits ill with the later reactionary editing of the biblical material. Thus Bloch seeks for subversive currents in the sources of the Bible, and he finds these by means of the category of class conflict.

Oral and written texts

I will return to the question of class conflict in a moment, but, in his own way, Bloch moves to the second string of biblical historical criticism, form criticism. The appeal lies in the emphasis on oral texts, a long and indistinct period of a text's production that leaves traces all over the later written text, for the oral continues alongside the written as alternative readings, pronunciations

[35] Bloch 1972, pp. 69–70; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 99.

or commentary. Bloch is less interested in the two other major emphases of form criticism, the concern with genre or *Gattung* and the setting in life [*Sitz im Leben*] of such genres. For Bloch, these oral traditions are the tales and songs of the people before the scribes got hold of them. These are the stories repressed in the revisions made by the priestly scribes. But, here, *Sitz im Leben* becomes important for Bloch, since the social and political setting for these oral texts is among the peasants, those dissatisfied with the political and economic structures under which they were forced to live.

Unfortunately, Bloch assumes what was a bulwark of form-critical studies, namely the reliability of oral tradition over against the written. For biblical scholars, the theological motivation for such a position should be obvious, and it derived from a wilfull ignorance of folklore studies that showed time and again the profound malleability of oral tradition, its sheer inventory power and ability to forget. This means Bloch's argument that distortions took place in the editing of written texts is on thin ground. What he wishes to preserve are more reliable oral traditions, but also the first written text in which an oral text writes itself: the truth of the oral text 'did not change till the written texts were re-copied, or till they were put together to form a new book'.[36] In many respects, Bloch replicates the assumptions of source and form criticism, for corruption occurs after these earlier moments, when redactors can get their unskilled hands on the material and bend it to their political wills. However, the notions of pristine oral texts or first written texts are highly problematic, for vested alteration along with unavoidable sloppiness is there from the beginning.

Yet, Bloch has a slightly different task in mind, and, here, the detective comes onto the scene. He discerns a more sinister and deceitful pattern of textual alteration, pretending to be sloppy and innocuous but working the text towards the official party line. In fact, rendering a text illegible, such as the book of Job, may be seen as a subtle way of neutralising protest, of preserving a revered text while blunting its critique. If this smacks of conspiracy theory, then Bloch's question has not been asked often enough: *Cui bono*, for whose benefit? His surprise is that precisely within biblical criticism – 'as the most famous of all philological activities' this question has not seemed rel-

[36] Bloch 1972, p. 70; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 99.

evant.[37] Historical criticism has provided the tools for uncovering what has been repressed. What it has not done is carry out such an investigation at a political level. It seems to me that this question remains pertinent despite the futility of the wish for a pristine moment of oral and written texts before the great corruptions of the redactors. However, this means that *Cui bono*? applies just as much to the oral units and traditions as to the later revisions that Bloch finds so objectionable. But Bloch has also fallen prey to the deeper logic of historical criticism, namely a search for origins that replicates in so many ways the biblical text itself, with its desire to locate the origins of human beings and their world, but above all the state of Israel or the Christian Church.

Forces of redaction

I have unavoidably moved into redaction criticism, the third element of historical criticism of the Bible. The end run of the other methods, with their search for the underlying written and oral sources, redaction criticism traces the myriad alterations, rearrangements and ideological agendas of the long editorial road from origin to final form. But Bloch wants the moment of first distortion, when the untampered text was altered for distinct religio-political reasons, and he finds it in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, circa 450 BCE. Ezra, the scribe and 'Church Commissioner' appointed by the Persian imperial government, marks the definitive moment of canonisation, with its process of excision and alteration in light of a theocratic agenda whose manifesto was the 'Book of Laws'. The popular, non-conformist texts that Ezra excluded took on a life of their own, disappearing into the unrecorded realms of oral literature, some of them turning up in the Haggadah, but none of them in the official version of Ezra. Or, for the New Testament, it is Paul with his sacrificial-death theology and the concerns of a missionary movement that sets up the depiction of Jesus in the Gospels, which were, in fact, written after Paul's letters.

It would be too easy to point out that the historical reconstruction around Ezra and Nehemiah is a pious fiction, or that the critical image of Paul is but one of a number of possibilities. As for the Hebrew Bible, the theory of a significant canonisation with Ezra belongs to a biblical criticism that still held the

[37] Bloch 1972, p. 71; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 100.

text itself to be a somewhat reliable source of information. However, the only evidence about Ezra and Nehemiah is in the books that bear their names, and this is always a problematic procedure. And yet, although biblical scholars have given away the notion of a distinct redactional and canonising process with Ezra, many of the theories about the formation of the text suggest that much of the activity of writing took place at some time in the Persian period (537–333 BCE).[38] The particular names have gone, the pre-existent sources have disappeared, but the importance of the period remains. In the end, this is a historical hypothesis upon which nothing too solid must rest, yet it does away with any notion of pristine earlier texts, of long stretches of oral tradition. Or, more cautiously, it points out that we just do not know about anything prior.

What are the implications for Bloch's method in *Atheism in Christianity*? He predicates his reading of the Bible on a condemnation of 'redaction by reaction',[39] of the (not so) pious distortions of subversive passages or their complete removal. Bloch feels that the high form of historical criticism that he witnessed in Germany at the time provides him with the tools to uncover vast slabs of subterranean material that run against the official theocratic line of the Bible. It seems to me that both the material and the possibility of finding it have dwindled significantly, that the findings of any detective work will be slim indeed. But what has happened in the biblical criticism that remains concerned with the origins of the texts – I think of those who suggest the origins of the texts in the Persian period – is that the question 'for whose benefit?' has become central. This is still historical criticism, but now the ideological and political reasons for writing have come to the fore: the question of the ideological dominance of a text as crucial as the Bible dominates such considerations.

Biblical criticism

For Bloch, the Bible must be approached by the critic as detective, its redactional overlays removed in order to catch glimpses of the fuller stories of subversion and protest. I have already suggested some problems with this – the

[38] See, for instance, Davies 1992.
[39] Bloch 1972, p. 73; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 102.

futile search for purer origins, the theological motivation behind this, and specific problems drawn from historical criticism ('reliable' oral material, the shaky hypothesis of Ezra-Nehemiah) – and I will draw these together a little later. Although the main impression is that Bloch searches for the pristine texts of protest, he does allow that later usage may render a text subversive.[40] That is to say, apart from the production of these texts as slave talk, their usage also comes into play. Thus, certain texts may take on a new life when reread, such as those of Balaam (Numbers 12), whose mix of curse and blessing becomes a means for cursing the local lords while apparently blessing them. But there is a difference between arguing for the initial function of texts as surreptitiously subversive and the subsequent use of texts for a similar purpose.

Once he has cleared his political way through the methodological assumptions of biblical criticism, Bloch outlines in a broad sweep the development of biblical criticism. I suspect this is for a readership – Marxist and otherwise – less familiar with the findings of biblical criticism. There is little point reiterating the discrepancies of the Bible, some samples of which Bloch rolls out before us, or even the signal moments on the way to a fully-fledged historical criticism from Spinoza to Hermann Gunkel. These are the standard moments in historical-critical work on the Pentateuch (Torah), and Bloch uses them as a series of examples for his own agenda. Let me cite but one: the book of Job, whose textual mess can best be understood in terms of a source hypothesis. The dislike of pious editors can hardly hold off for more than a page or two:

> the editor must be thought of not so much as 'mechanical' but rather as a member of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, with the law-book *De Puritate Fidei* in his hand, proceeding against this heretical text by pruning where he cannot condemn, and by inoculating all he opposes.[41]

In fact, Bloch argues that it is precisely with texts such as Job, or Genesis about Cain, Jacob's struggle with the angel, the serpent of Paradise or the Tower of Babel, among others, that the editorial activity is strongest because of the buried message of protest. But, here, the problem of the vanishing redactor becomes apparent: the more sophisticated and comprehensive the redactor

---

[40] See Bloch 1972, pp. 13–14; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, pp. 29–30.
[41] Bloch 1972, p. 78; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 107.

has carried out his task, the less obvious, the more seamless and smooth, is his work. Redaction criticism can only operate with all the breaks and seams of what is a messy text. And this has led biblical critics into a divide over the dull and mechanical redactor who does a sloppy job, or the highly skilled redactor who works very subtly with precisely those breaks and gaps in the text. But, even here, the problem returns, for one of the logical outcomes of the skilled redactor is a move away from redaction criticism to the narrator or writer of a text produced out of whole cloth.

For Bloch, the many problems are sufficient evidence for sources and redaction, especially for the weighty redactions of politically sensitive material. Bloch is less interested in the everyday breaks that show the hand of the redactor with monotonous regularity. Rather, he wants to focus on the relatively few political texts, the ones written over and neutralised by the counter-revolutionary priestly redactors. The leitmotiv for these texts is the hint of rebellion against Yahweh, however subdued it might be.

The politics of interpretation

In the end, the key feature Bloch wishes to introduce into historical criticism is the category of class, since the Bible is very much a text of both those who labour and those who live off that labour. In all its variety, there are stories in the Bible that have become homely in the smallest of peasant households, but also those used by overlords and religious professionals. And such class differences do not merely indicate different modes of reading the Bible: the texts themselves speak with a double voice, one that is and is not fully for the rich and powerful. The Bible is then riven with class conflict: not a conflict that may be read in terms of bourgeoisie and proletariat alone – although it does that too – but in terms of the basic Marxist category of class difference, however that may be articulated historically, between exploiters and exploited. And Bloch finds that the deepest affinity of the Bible, despite its 'adaptability to select master-ideologies',[42] is to ordinary, uneducated people, who took the stories as their stories.

The litmus for such a method – very much part of Bloch's utopian hermeneutics – is the conflict between the Reformer Luther and the peasant leader

[42] Bloch 1972, p. 24; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 45.

Thomas Münzer, worked out in detail in his earlier *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*.[43] While the former could invoke Paul and the cross of Christ as the lot of all, the latter called upon the Exodus and the Bible's anger 'against the Ahabs and Nimrods'.[44]

As for *Atheism in Christianity*, Bloch seeks to uncover both the way ruling-class ideologies have been imposed on the text, and to examine the strategies of subversive slave talk. The overlays and myriad complexities of such materials require readings that attend to the subtle shifts that have taken place. Thus, Bloch is not interested in submissive slave talk (and so the Psalms do not appear),[45] but, rather, subversive texts that have subsequently been altered and which may be recovered, as well as texts that have been rendered subversive through later usage. What survives is the masked or underground text. Such texts have a double function, a 'sly irony', appearing to appease the rulers while openly criticising and lampooning them. 'Men often spoke in parables, saying one thing and meaning another; praising the prince and praising the gallows to prove it.'[46]

As an example of such a text, Bloch offers an interpretation of Korah's rebellion in Numbers 16. As it is now, the text speaks of a priestly rebellion, centring on the issue of ritual and incense, which is crushed through divine intervention. In this form it is an account of a 'premature palace revolution'[47] within the priestly upper class, but what catches Bloch's attention is the way the revolt is dealt with: God opens the ground which swallows up Korah and his conspirators as an example to anyone else who would rebel. This is not a God of war, waging a fight for survival, but a God of 'white-guard terror',[48] one who emerges from the redactor's pen. For Bloch, an echo of political rebellion reverberates through the text. Not only does the punishment signal this, but the perpetual recurrence of the Israelites' grumbling throughout the chapter indicates, for Bloch, a rebellious anti-Yahweh voice that has been

---

[43] Bloch 1969, see Bloch 1985, Volume 2.
[44] Bloch 1972, p. 23; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 44.
[45] Bloch extends such an analysis to the use Nazis made of Christian stories for children. For instance, in 'The Foreign Child's Holy Christ', the frozen child starves to death only to be drawn up into the bosom of the angels, where the unbearable life on earth is forgotten (see Bloch 1998, pp. 56–7; Bloch 1985, pp. 71–3).
[46] Bloch 1972, p. 15; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 31.
[47] Bloch 1972, p. 80; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 109.
[48] Ibid.

turned into something else – the sign of disobedience and recalcitrance on the part of the people themselves.

Bloch undertakes this kind of reading again and again throughout the book, reading with the assumptions and strategies of biblical historical criticism in one hand and the hermeneutics of class in the other. And it leads him to argue for two concepts of God, one 'which has the *Futurum* as its mode-of-being' and the other that 'has been institutionalized down from above'.[49] The latter, with its radical transcendence, submission and atonement, is the one against which the rebellions are directed.

Throughout the rest of the book Bloch pursues this bifurcation along class lines: 'murmuring' versus submission or tail-wagging. One of the criticisms levelled at Bloch is the difficulty of finding such a continuous theme inside and outside the Bible. So let us consider this more closely. Initially, he suggests two principles in tension with one another – Creation and Apocalypse. In regard to Creation, Bloch dips into conventional German biblical scholarship of the time to argue that Yahweh emerges from being a local, tribal deity to become the all-encompassing creator. The move from henotheism to monotheism effectively cut off any protest, 'the pot arguing with the potter'.[50] The priestly creation story of Genesis 1 is its prime mark – its calm, untroubled 'behold it was very good' (Gen 1: 4, 10, 12 etc.) is profoundly suspicious. The problem that arises almost immediately in Genesis – the wickedness of human beings in the Fall, the reason for the flood and so on – has a convenient scapegoat in Genesis, namely, the serpent and human beings themselves. In this way, the Creator absolves himself from anything that mars his creation. Bloch follows this creator god from his murky origins as the demiurge of Middle-Kingdom Egypt to the sculptor-god Ptah who becomes the creator of all Egypt. Thence onto Israel, for whom the creator God moves ever higher into the heavens, shedding the other gods around him.

However, the problem of misery opens up the other theme in the Bible – Exodus. Misery may be dealt with through evil spirits whom one could blame and from whom one sought salvation; or it may be traced to Exodus. Here, argues Bloch, lies not a directive from above, but one that 'is filled with the

[49] Bloch 1972, p. 81; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 109.
[50] Bloch 1972, p. 29; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 59.

hope that lies before us'.[51] The utopian dimension is crucial: the principle that leads out of this terrible world and into a better one cannot be the same principle as that which leads into this world – creation.

The hermeneutical principle of Creation versus Exodus/Apocalypse is a curious one, for it emerges as much from the Bible as from Bloch's philosophical, hermeneutical and aesthetic imperative to read for utopia. *The Principle of Hope* manifests this principle even more clearly. In 'The Bible and the Kingdom of Neighbourly Love' Bloch sketches out a line, responsible for the earliest form of social utopia, from the Bedouin nomadic communism of the desert, through the prophets and Jesus to early Christian communism (and then on into the work of Augustine and Joachim of Fiore).[52] The sharp distinction between such a line and its opposite – Canaanite hierarchies, wealth and poverty, the church of Baal that runs through to the Christian Church, the 'ideologically profitable insurance company'[53] – is both illuminating and problematic, not least because the initial distinction of nomadic/settled, Israelite/Canaanite can no longer be held (see further below). Yet, this distinction provides a basic structural element for Bloch's reading of the Bible. Often, Bloch does identify something central, but, as Geoghegan points out,[54] the attempt to trace a structural dialectic throughout the Bible strains the text. Bloch is well aware of the complex and varying voices in the Bible, and I agree that a dialectical reading is able to deal with such voices better than any other approach. However, we need an even more sophisticated dialectical reading that accounts even better for the twists, curious alliances and changing oppositions of the text, one that reads back and forth between the Bible's ideological, social and economic contradictions.

Yet Bloch's own argument, let alone the Bible, has a distinct teleology. For he has an unflagging zeal for anything that values human beings, and it begins with the interpretive rule: 'only critical attention to the *veiled* and (in the book of Exodus) *ineradicable subversion* can bring to light the organon of the non-theocratic axis in the Bible'.[55] All that rails against theocracy and its attendant hierocracy, against transcendence and obedience, and against the

---

[51] Bloch 1972, p. 31; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 61.
[52] Bloch 1995, pp. 496–515; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 575–82.
[53] Bloch 1970, p. 89.
[54] Geoghegan 1996, p. 99.
[55] Bloch 1972, p. 82; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 110; translation modified.

diminution of human beings has a distinct logic that sends it on a trajectory beyond the Bible. He wants to bring the *homo absconditus* out of hiding and he does so through a number of strategies. One is a dialectical inversion of key theological categories, as we will see below: the *Deus absconditus* is in fact a cipher for the human being who remains hidden, the agent of suppressed rebellions. Another is the argument that the God-hypostasis needs to be placed on its feet, in the same way that Marx performed a podiatric move on Hegel's idealist dialectic: 'God' is merely a hypostasis of what human beings can and will be, the utopian possibility of a transformed human nature. This is a temporal, horizontal transcendence. A third way – the burden of *Atheism in Christianity* – is to argue that the protests against Yahweh or Elohim in the Bible are inherently a protest atheism. Impossible within the world of the biblical text, such atheism can only emerge when that world has closed down. For the protest against God carries with it the assumption that the full human potential can emerge only when subservience to a higher principal – divine or human – has been thrown off. The only religious literature that holds out such a promise is, for Bloch, the Bible.

Before passing on to the question of myth, let me comment on Bloch's method. It is too easy to criticise Bloch for either his lack of Marxist rigour or his lack of theological acumen – although his appeal is that he is remarkably astute in bridging both sides. On one side, his mystical millenarianism is too far from political analysis and action. On the other side, Bloch's dependence on biblical historical criticism leaves him vulnerable to many of its problems.

The first has been rehearsed often enough in Marxist debates,[56] so let me dwell with the second. Bloch was unavoidably tied to the nature of biblical criticism at the time of writing: it was still the heyday of historical criticism, with its interaction between form, source and redaction criticisms. Anyone who dared to raise a critique of historical criticism risked being lumped with theological conservatives or an unredeemable fringe. So Bloch took on many of the assumptions of historical criticism, and yet, as he works inside the system he seeks to bring out its ideological and political dimensions.

However, the hegemony of biblical historical criticism at Bloch's time has now passed. A host of newer approaches no longer work with the assump-

[56] So Hudson 1982.

tions of historical criticism, raising new questions about the text and dealing with older problems in very different ways. For instance, if we consider the sources upon which Bloch relies so heavily – the famous JEDP of the Pentateuch – they become constructs of the critics. These sources, for which no evidence exists, become something that hovers between the biblical text and the critic's own writing, having the objectivity of neither. It is not that the idea of such sources is not interesting, nor indeed that it does not help in certain types of interpretation, but, once we add the concerns of feminism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, new historicism and queer theory – to name but a few – a whole host of new questions that would never have been raised within historical criticism begin to emerge.

There are other problems as well, not least of which is the way historical criticism was predicated upon a search for origins – ur-text, earliest source, origin of Israel or the historical Jesus. Multiple factors played a role here, such as the political and ideological influence of the belated emergence of Germany as a nation-state under Bismarck, as well as, in regard to psychoanalysis and sexual difference, the perpetually transferred search for individual origin. But what historical criticism could not avoid was the way the text's own obsession with origins – of humanity, the world, Israel etc. – replicates itself over and again in the methods used to study it. Bloch falls prey to this with little sense of the ideological effects on his own writing. He too searches for origins, however subversive, which reach back to the earliest moment. Or, the genuine strata of protest against earthly and heavenly overlords lies beneath the redactors' hands, in the earliest sources or in the oral tradition. The surprising thing is that Bloch himself does not make such observations, even though Marxism provides the best analytical approach for doing so.

The question, then, is whether Bloch's method is bound to historical criticism. Certainly, many of his exegetical observations and conclusions rely on notions of sources, oral traditions and redaction. However, let me come at the problem differently. The question Bloch asks of the Bible – *Cui bono?* – still needs to be asked. Bloch insistently asked this question of the Bible itself, but he asks it all too rarely of biblical criticism itself. This surprises me, for, if the Bible is one of the most ideologically overdetermined texts we have, then we would expect its interpretation to be riven in similar ways.

Further, Bloch tries to account for the fact that the Bible is not merely a canonical text for the powerful, but that it continues to be a revolutionary

text, that it has been so for the Levellers, Hussites, Münzer and his peasants (I might add political and liberation theologies today). This, he argues, is not just a misreading. Something ensures that the Bible does not 'work in the same way as every other religious book of the upper classes and of deified despotism'.[57] Bloch's solution to that 'something' in *Atheism in Christianity* is 'to see through and cut away the Ezraean matter, and to identify and save the Bible's choked and buried "plebeian" element'.[58] Beneath the priestly redactions, and over against the ideologues of the state like Paul in the New Testament, lies the origin of a revolutionary Bible.

I am not sure that this is the best answer, but I will outline a couple of possibilities to which I will return at the end of this chapter. A common argument is that as one of the prime ideological shapers of that world the Bible provided a language of revolt in which the Levellers, Hussites, peasants and others could express their political and economic grievances. Another angle is to argue that the Bible's transcendental perspective provides critiques of any form of oppressive politics and economics – the 'transcendental reserve'. It reminds us of the radical contingency of any human social and political form, but it falls into the trap of granting too much to transcendence. A third possibility is that the Bible does indeed enable a political agenda which, however flawed in terms of gender or race or sexuality, is opposed to exploitation and domination. That is, in a round-about way, Bloch may be onto something: in the complex ways in which texts respond to their social circumstances – reactions to a dominant way of thought, political pamphlets, escapism, crystallisations of what others feel at an inchoate level, providing a new way of thinking that points the way forward, efforts to provide ideological resolutions of social and political tensions, and so on – the oppositional politics that may be generated from the Bible are as much interpretations that respond to different situations as inherent in the text itself.

The critique of myth

One of the surprises of this book is the recurring interest in mythology by many of those on whom I comment. It seems as though any discussion of

[57] Bloch 1972, p. 75; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, pp. 103–4.
[58] Bloch 1972, p. 75; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 103; translation corrected.

the Bible or theology cannot, in their eyes, avoid the question of myth, which then becomes one of the major features of their work. Thus, Bloch, Benjamin, Adorno, Althusser and Žižek all come back to myth, as critique and retrieval, for it is part of the Marxist problematic of ideology. Bloch is, with his detective's nose, most enthusiastic about the revolutionary possibilities of certain types of biblical myth. Benjamin, I will argue, is less enamoured, although he cannot escape the cycle of biblical myth. Althusser's early writings provide some surprising insights into biblical myth, Žižek identifies myth with the passage from the Real to the Symbolic, and Adorno systematically seeks to unmask myth as part of his ideology critique. And yet, they all want, in the end, to close down myth and its baleful influence. Bloch, by contrast, cautions against such a sustained dismissal, for with dialectical discernment myth can be revolutionary as well as reactionary.

What Bloch manages to do in his discussion of myth is provide a distinct example of the more sophisticated ideology critique that takes ideology neither as false consciousness that needs to be unmasked, nor as a positive force in its socialist form. For Bloch, all ideologies, no matter how repressive, have an emancipatory-utopian dimension about them – he will later make such a move with the astral myths he at first criticises – that cannot be separated so easily from deception and illusion. Thus, in the very process of manipulation and domination, ideology also has a moment of utopian residue, an element that opens up other possibilities at the very point of failure.[59] And so it is with biblical myth, for the subversive elements in the myths that interest him are enabled by the repressive ideologies that show through again and again. All the same, I find Bloch too enthusiastic for such emancipatory and anticipatory elements; he moves too quickly from repression to emancipation and would have done well to tarry with the negative somewhat longer.

Alongside myth, metaphysics emerges from relative obscurity in the work of Bloch, Benjamin, Adorno and Althusser. That Marxists should be interested in metaphysics would be enough to make anyone curious. Historical circumstances play a role here, for the extraordinary influence of Heidegger and existentialism meant that some engagement with metaphysics was inevitable. Bloch was hardly going to let metaphysics or myth remain the preserve of fascism, since to give discursive ground like this and abandon such vast

[59] See further on this Kellner 1997, pp. 82–7.

arenas to the opposition was hardly Bloch's style. In response, he argues that what passed for metaphysics under Nazism was a decayed version, using the label of metaphysics to purvey 'rot-gut'. But the danger is hardly there: Heidegger's more sophisticated return to the pre-Socratics and argument for an end of metaphysics means for Bloch a cementing in of the categories of metaphysics that denies the dynamic and temporal promise of metaphysics. Bloch criticises Heidegger for an implicit equation between metaphysics and myth, with the result that Heidegger's mythological thought ends up siding with domination and power. Heidegger's argument that the end of metaphysics must arise from within metaphysics itself turns out to be an argument for the status quo, an emptying of any possibility of change. Bloch may well have read Heidegger too rapidly here, for the impossibility of moving the earth beyond its own sphere of possibility through human will may itself be read as a utopian dialectic that Adorno was to pick up.

Bloch insists that the central theme of metaphysics, Being, must be understood as Not-Yet-Being, as Being open to utopia; this makes dialectical materialism the only viable form of metaphysics, for it is, by definition, an open process. Again, Bloch presses against the opposition between metaphysics and dialectical materialism, suggesting not merely that the openness of both brings them together, but that even the mechanistic world-views of vulgar Marxism are metaphysical. Yet, for Bloch, the Bible will return the distinctly temporal dimension to metaphysics and Marxism.

Let us return to myth: Bloch undertakes a prolonged theological discussion over how biblical myth is to be understood. Here, the philosopher wades into theology, arguing that the key issue is how human beings fare in the theological equation: are they great or small? The names Bloch cites are either major figures in the tradition such as Augustine, or central theologians in Germany of the first half of the twentieth century like Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann. The last two were not only profoundly influential theologians, but also biblical scholars; Bultmann was a theologian and New-Testament critic, while Barth filled his *Church Dogmatics* with large slabs of biblical exegesis. Further, Barth made his initial impact with a theological commentary on the Epistle to the Romans that relied heavily for its theological dialectic on Kierkegaard. Yet, all of those who appear are charged with removing human agency and passing it over to God. Thus, Augustine, who saw human will as a powerful faculty, makes a sharp break between human history and theistic absolutism.

His major contribution, for Bloch, was to read history, on the basis of the Bible, as a drama of events, acts and a dénouement, one that reaches its high point with Christ and end in the Last Judgement. Although history is the march of the City of God on earth, history and the coming of the Kingdom are two irreconcilable categories that result from 'a theistic absolutism of enormous proportions'.[60] Karl Barth's massive exaggeration of this, stressing as far as possible the sheer transcendence of God, merely takes Augustine's deflation of human agency to its logical conclusion.

However, Augustine's greatest achievement – which Bloch wishes to undo – is to merge the Creator deity with the apocalyptic one, thereby enabling the clean break between history and its end. Here, we have the standard Christian narrative running from Creation to Salvation to the Last Judgement. For Bloch, this is a profoundly non-biblical conjunction, something put together to make Christianity cohere (Benjamin was to make full use of such a schema). But, here, we end up with a reactionary recreation of the past in which Salvation is a return to the Garden of Eden. Yet, for Bloch, Apocalypse – also the name of the last book of the Christian Bible – is not the Garden of Eden: the Apocalypse registers not a satisfaction with the world, but a profound dissatisfaction, a yearning for something better.

As far as German theology is concerned, the first target is Bultmann.[61] Despite his admiration for Bultmann's 'invigorating' arguments, Bloch takes issue with Bultmann's programme of dymythologising, in which he argued – although Bloch assumes this rather than spelling it out – that the Bible cannot help but to assume the worldview of the time in which it was composed. But Bultmann pushed this further to argue that the predominant mode of expression was myth, and that for the gospel, the Kerygma, to be meaningful in the contemporary situation of the early twentieth century, this myth must be excised from the Church's message. And it was not merely the accretions to the central message he had in mind: focusing on the Gospel narratives, Bultmann urged that the central notions of Christianity derived from the New Testament, such as a three-tiered cosmos with heaven above and hell below, the miracles of Jesus, especially the empty tomb and the resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the return of Christ on the clouds at the end of

[60] Bloch 1972, p. 32; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 62.
[61] See also Bloch 1998, p. 299; Bloch 1985, Volume 9, p. 342.

history, should all be discarded as unworkable and unbelievable myths. The list could go on, but once the demythologising task was complete, the programme called for a remythologisation in terms of the contemporary patterns of thought, specifically the existentialism that had swept through European philosophy.

Controversial and influential, Bultmann remains a towering figure in theology and New-Testament criticism. But Bloch is not enamoured with demythologising. Although he can well understand the reasons for being 'wary of the mythical sphere in its entirety'[62] after the Nazi myths of blood and soil, he argues that the 'myths' dispensed with are those that contain accounts of murmuring and rebellion, that is, the possibility for human beings to assert themselves with dignity against oppressors. What happens with the ban of myth is 'that the primitive, uncultured specters are thrown out, but the directives and announcements from on high remain to haunt as they always did'.[63]

But demythologisation is only part of the problem; Bloch objects to the 'myth' with which Bultmann seeks to 'remythologise' the New Testament – existentialism. Adorno also took on the baleful legacy of existentialism, but Bloch argues that the directives from on high now 'withdraw a bit and operate on the inner perceptions'.[64] The formative influence for Bultmann was the existentialism of Heidegger, through which Bultmann sought to provide a fresh and meaningful Kerygma. In the end, Bultmann was a perfectly conventional evangelical Lutheran, seeking to give the Christian message a form that would appeal once again in a Europe under monopoly capitalism. Bloch's criticism, however, is of existentialism itself, arguing that it attempts to do away not only with myth, but also with bodily, social and cosmic elements so that the pure individual remains – a privatised soul. The Kerygma then becomes one of speaking from existence to existence, and anything else is nonsense or confusion. The revelation of God becomes a direct address to 'man', the Word itself. But, here, the Lutheran nature of Bultmann's work comes to the fore, with its absolute focus on the Word (the elision between

---

[62] Bloch 1998, p. 296; Bloch 1985, Volume 9, p. 339.

[63] Bloch 1972, p. 34; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 64. In one respect, Bultmann carries through an older logic that saw the Bible as the beginning of a completely rational faith free from myth, from Maimonides to Hermann Cohen's *Religion of Reason* (see Bloch 1998, p. 298; Bloch 1985, Volume 9, p. 341).

[64] Bloch 1972, p. 34; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 64.

speech, text and Christ is quite deliberate), that which addresses human beings here and now.

Bloch's second critique – apart from the nature of existentialism – is that Bultmann does not distinguish between myths, dismissing all of them as one lump, 'blithely ignorant of the gunpowder they are handling'.[65] And, thirdly, Bultmann privatises faith, existence and myth, thereby missing the worldly dimension of myth: theology and the Bible belong to 'the realm of the lonely soul and its solid middle-class God'.[66] Adapting the by now well-known Marxist critique of reification, and its associated elements of fragmentation and individualisation, Bloch's criticism of Bultmann has made its way into liberation and political theologies, among others: Christianity has largely been privatised under capitalism, restricted to the realm of the private individual and has thereby lost its collective emphases. I cannot help but wonder whether a reference or two to Lukács, who, of course, developed the notion of reification in his extraordinarily influential *History and Class Consciousness*, might have sharpened Bloch's critique of Bultmann somewhat – suggesting perhaps that his theology drinks deeply from the tainted waters of capitalism and the ideology of liberalism. But then Bloch's acknowledgement of his Marxist contemporaries is sparse at the best of times.

However, Bloch *does* identify Kierkegaard as a source for Bultmann's reconstruction (as also for Karl Barth's 'dialectical theology'). Kierkegaard will return in this book, albeit somewhat the worse for wear and tear, in my discussion of Adorno. For Bloch, however, Kierkegaard's eschatology of the present moment is a means of sidestepping the political and theological import of the Bible's eschatology: enigmatic information about the Eschaton becomes a gnostic self-knowledge that leads to the individual's awakening.

Finally, Bloch argues that Bultmann cannot avoid myth, this time of a distinctly Protestant type: in arguing that 'man' need only be delivered from himself to experience metanoia or change of mind in God's presence, Bultmann relies on the myth of the Fall. The individual must still put aside sin and pride, however existential, before God. Bultmann's present Moment assumes that God is the only one met in the encounter. Yet, submission to God replicates

---

[65] 'Ohne Ahnung solchen Sprengpulvers'; Bloch 1972, p. 39; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 70.

[66] Bloch 1972, p. 40; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 70; see Bloch 1998, p. 300; Bloch 1985, Volume 9, p. 343.

all that is politically objectionable in the Bible, and, here, politics creeps back into Bultmann's theology. In the name of demythologisation, Bultmann has, in fact, recuperated the myths of authority and suppression; or, rather, he has enabled their preservation precisely through existentialism.

The criticisms of the liberal sources of existentialism are exactly to the point, as is the impossibility of avoiding myth in anything that wants to retain some theological meaning, but let me return to the lumping together of all things under 'myth'. For, in the lead-up to his discussion of Bultmann, Bloch spells out his criteria for the discernment of myth: the purpose of such material counts rather than the pre-scientific ideas they contain. Do they speak of transformation and liberation? Do they have cunning heroes who win through a ruse? But this requires some distinction within the blanket term 'myth' – Engels's 'imbecility of the primeval forest'[67]– between the despotism and domination of myth proper and those that, like fairy-tales, subvert such domination.[68] The story of Prometheus in Greek mythology, or of the serpent in Paradise in the Bible, gives voice to this 'fairy-tale' element in myth. Should we take demythologisation seriously, then both conformist and non-conformist materials would disappear. Bloch would much prefer to have them both rather than no biblical myth at all, for Bultmann's demythologisation discards the 'joyful message', the 'deepest utopian theme'[69] of biblical mythology along with all that is oppressive.

If the first step of his argument seeks the political purpose of myth, his second step distinguishes further between different types of myth. The reason: Bloch does not want a wholesale recovery of myth, for this would render him an anti-Enlightenment thinker beyond the wide circle of Marxism. And so, myths resulting from ignorance and superstition may go, but those that express the quality and wonder of nature should not. Fairy tale, legend, saga and myth all become separate entities.[70] Here, he invokes Greek art, science (Kepler) and the romantics. He is, of course, trying to run myth through a dialectics – 'destroying and saving the myth in a single dialectical process'[71] – that is different from Bultmann's position.

---

[67] Bloch 1998, p. 297; Bloch 1985, Volume 9, p. 339.
[68] See also Bloch 1988, pp. 163–85.
[69] Bloch 1998, p. 300; Bloch 1985, Volume 9, p. 343.
[70] See also Bloch 1998, pp. 301–2; Bloch 1985, Volume 9, pp. 344–5.
[71] Bloch 1972, p. 37; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 67.

Bloch, however, falls away from a more rigorous dialectical reading. In the end, he prefers a 'particularly sober and discerning mind' that does not see myth as uniformly undifferentiated, without shades of difference.[72] Rather, he needs to insist that it is precisely because of the myths of despotism that those of cunning non-conformism can be there too. It is not merely that we cannot understand the latter without the former, but that the enabling conditions for subversive myths are precisely those myths that are not so.

I find the subtle Marxist critiques of Bultmann (and the others who follow) extremely pertinent. Bloch sweeps me along, his enthusiasm emerging from the text. Yet, a question keeps recurring for me: does Bloch not seek to defend and rescue the Bible not only from Marxists but also from theologians? Apart from engaging in a strategy that forestalls any criticisms from theology and biblical studies, Bloch plays a tricky double game. He wishes to rescue the Bible and yet resists the truth claims that theology seeks to impose. Both dimensions – rescuing the Bible and theology's truth claims – have their own problems. Whereas the Bible itself makes no necessary truth claims for any 'reality' beyond its own text, theology is a different matter. Here Bloch dares to tread. For, the moment that he argues for the logic of atheism within the Bible, he enters the theological terrain; he must battle in the very terms of theological thought and language. At the same time, he rejects the representational assumptions of this language. The move is both daring – using the internal logic of the Bible and theology to show that the claims about God's existence do not necessarily follow – and problematic – the common language of theology sets up a debate about the nature of God which is precisely a theological debate.

The second part of the problem is the effort to rescue the Bible. Not merely content to retrieve the Bible as a classic text, he wants much more: a potent political force for the present situation in Europe. To my mind, any effort to rescue the Bible falls prey to the notion that this literature is good for you if you read it (correctly), and this is very much a legacy of its appropriation as sacred scripture by the Church for the edification of the faithful. Bloch does not, in the end, avoid such a tendency.

Although I find Bloch's attempt to rescue the Bible for revolutionary politics problematic, another dimension of his work is very appealing: he debunks

---

[72] Ibid.

the assumption of religious institutions that this is their own text by default. Less an effort to wrest the Bible away from its 'natural' home – church, synagogue or mosque – his argument assumes that such institutions have, in fact, appropriated and colonised the Bible. The marks of a text ill at ease in these contexts are precisely those elements that Bloch seeks to uncover, those that run against the institutions in question. Here, I find Bloch's treatment of the Bible most persuasive and full of potential, not only for literary criticism and philosophy, but especially for biblical studies.

Karl Barth, the other towering figure of German theology at the time, follows closely behind Bultmann in Bloch's text. But Bloch's reading of Barth is hardly conventional. Since Barth begins with God's absolute transcendence and then seeks to bridge the immeasurable gulf between God and human beings, his theology is one long detailed elaboration of that radical transcendence. Thus, *Deus revelatus* is nothing more than the *Deus absconditus*, the gospel of love is a variation on the fear of law, God's incarnational 'Yes' is spoken to an utterly fallen world that is still his creation, and eschatology becomes entirely immanent. Except that Barth must have a ladder that enabled him to peer into God's mind: 'Barth must have considered himself the one creature exempt from the boundaries of the creaturely knowledge he so radically asserted'.[73] For Bloch, such radical transcendence sucks all the history out of God: static, alien, beyond history, it lacks any sense of an Eschaton. Thereby it becomes another part of the oppressive mythology that justifies the status quo.[74] By contrast, in a characteristic lack of humility, Bloch approves in a qualified manner – a little too much Lutheran theology of the cross – of Jürgen Moltmann's appropriation of his own thought, especially his emphasis on the Eschaton in response to suffering.

Yet Barth has a dialectical use for Bloch: at the moment Barth valorises the On-High at the expense of human beings, he unwittingly allows the elevation of human beings. The further God is from human beings, the more space they have to rise from subjection. *Deus absconditus* actually uncovers *homo absconditus*. For Bloch, then, Barth's emphasis on radical transcendence is not merely

[73] Bloch 1972, p. 48; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 77.

[74] Adorno was to make this point much more concrete, arguing that the high terms, retooled from traditional theology, were signals of a totalitarian tendency that both used such concepts for oppression and effectively demonised the absolute.

theological arrogance; it also demonises God, who can now be overthrown by human beings who can come out of hiding and stand on their own feet.

Bloch reads theologians in the same way he reads myth, looking for the subversive moment. And so, after Barth and Bultmann, comes Albert Schweitzer, musician, doctor and sometime biblical scholar who, in the midst of his comfortable bourgeois research, makes an astounding discovery: Jesus was no supporter of the status quo or purveyor of bourgeois morals. He was a firebrand who opposed Roman and Jewish authorities in the name of an immanent Kingdom of God. Bloch's surprise is that Schweitzer himself was no revolutionary.

Schweitzer's great work, *Von Reimarius zu Wrede: Eine Geschichte der Leben-Jesu Forshung* (1906), still holds its own in biblical studies, particularly in the so-called search for the historical Jesus. Even then, in the first great phase of the search, Schweitzer concluded that each researcher uncannily constructed an ideal self-image. By contrast, Schweitzer's Jesus was so radically distinct that Schweitzer simply gave up his established career in biblical studies and his potential careers in music and medicine and went to Africa to live out the demands of such a person.

Bloch relishes Schweitzer's discovery and response, but it also enables him to enlist Jesus among the revolutionary biblical figures. The effort is breathtaking, for Jesus becomes a key figure in his own counter-reading of the Bible, backed up by a motley collection of writers.[75] Jesus is, for Bloch, one in a long line from Exodus and the Hebrew prophets to Thomas Münzer, and the key lies in eschatology. Any effort to water such a message down is reactionary, whether we find it in the biblical myths of domination, being-oriented Greek thought in the early Church, the struggle for state control in the Middle Ages, or Jewish efforts like those of Hermann Cohen to distil an a-temporal messianic ethics.

And yet, for all his toying with history, the mythical Jesus draws Bloch's enthusiasm, a myth that comes from the motifs of insurrection and slave talk in the Hebrew Bible.

So, again, at this end of things we see how the person of the rebel, along with the apocalyptic promise-myth, is implicitly an important figure in biblical exegesis. And how these very myths, in their clarity, shed decisive light on

---

[75] See Bloch 1972, pp. 55–6; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, pp. 84–5.

others of their kind outside the Bible, too: on crypto-messianic myths, which are by no means lacking in the 'light of his fury', but which still, despite that, need the words spoken in the Bible, 'Behold, I make all things new,' if they are ever to come alive with fire.[76]

The recovery of myth is the linchpin of Bloch's reading of the Bible. Given his dialectical reading of myth in terms of domination and rebellion, he plays with two permutations of this dialectic. The default position is that the two are inseparable – his commentary on the Bible relies on this. Yet he often takes another, namely the rejection of myths of domination in favour of subversive ones, particularly with his focus on utopia where the latter will be realised. This line strengthens when he argues that mythology precedes the division of labour and formation of classes, only later becoming imaginative normalisations of social contradictions, or ideologies.[77] These earliest myths come from primitive communism and may be discerned in the mix of later mythology by their rebellious elements – Prometheus is the favoured example.[78] As with my criticism of his treatment of biblical sources, Bloch's dialectic slides away at these points and spuriously favours the earliest and supposedly pristine layers.

There is, however, a deeper problem that will recur with Benjamin in another key, namely, the theological claims of biblical myth. Most of the time, Bloch reads such myths as a language or code for politics: rebellion against Yahweh is political rebellion. But he goes further: such protest is also against God himself. Now he is in a curious bind, for, although he denies such a God existence, the protests against him are not merely against wisps of air. What then is the status of the God against whom the myths protest? Bloch does not offer us an adequate answer.

Exegesis

But let us now turn from theory to exegesis. The remainder of *Atheism in Christianity* passes through long chapters on the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, to the development of a distinctly a-theological argument con-

[76] Bloch 1972, p. 57; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 86.
[77] See Bloch 1988, pp. 114–5.
[78] See Bloch 1988, p. 35.

cerning the internal logic of the Bible's protest against God. But the vast span of *The Principle of Hope* also includes stretches of detailed exegesis. There are some differences between both works, *Atheism in Christianity* running more systematically through the Bible, while *The Principle of Hope* is a little more selective, focusing on the religious symbols that cluster around birth and death. At one end, Bloch zeroes in on the theme of Eden/Paradise/Promised Land as a key utopian feature, and at the other resurrection, Day of Judgement and return of the Messiah.

The Hebrew Bible

Eden is a paradigmatic example of how a biblical motif launches a trajectory that Bloch follows through centuries of thought.[79] After seeking the wished-for geographical Edenic utopias, he concludes: 'Eldorado-Eden therefore comprehensively embraces the other outlined utopias'.[80] Yet Eden cannot be separated from the idea of a Promised Land, which he suggests precedes the Babylonian garden story borrowed by the Israelites, nor from the new Jerusalem, when Eden will be restored at the end. But Bloch is interested in the way Eden remains a physical, geographical space, a garden to which entry is forbidden but searching for it and living close by are permitted. This unfallen natural space is remarkably moveable, often connected with other legends, but Bloch finds it in Jerusalem, on the antipodean Jerusalem (Dante), India (in the broadest possible sense), Prester John's Indian kingdom, the voyage of St Brendan and St Brendan's Isle, in the Atlantic (which was often read as India), in what drove Columbus, who believed that close to his newly found 'India' was Paradise, which would soon lie within Christendom, in the south land, terra australis, in the icy north of the kingdom of Thule, and then off earth in the stars, or within the earth.[81]

Eden becomes, for Bloch, a utopian, future-oriented image. So his focus moves to the end of life, where he finds the efforts to outdo death a reason to exercise a major love, biblical exegesis.[82] Here, he traces the rise of belief in

[79] Bloch 1995, pp. 758–94; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 887–929.
[80] Bloch 1995, p. 793; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 929.
[81] A comparable example of the way a particular biblical theme underlies a whole discussion is the role of the Tower of Babel and Solomon's temple in the discussion of architectural utopias (Bloch 1995, pp. 711–21; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 832–44).
[82] Bloch 1995, pp. 1125–33; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 1323–33.

resurrection in the latest sections of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, actively espoused by Jesus and the Pharisees, and then in early Christianity with its strong apocalyptic hope for the end of death itself. The fundamental drive of the resurrection from the first and second deaths (physical death and hell) is '*a thirst for justice*; thus the wish became a postulate, the post-mortal scene became an out-and-out tribunal'.[83] Resurrection becomes a crucial feature of Bloch's favoured apocalyptic thought. For, on Judgement Day, a collective resurrection overruns the merely individual notion and justice is dispensed by a returned Christ. And this advent of Christ was always expected soonest at revolutionary moments, such as the Albigensian wars or the German Peasants' War: 'retribution for all the living after death, for all the dead after the last trumpet, retained a wishful revolutionary meaning for those that labour and are heavy laden, who could not help themselves in reality or were defeated in the struggle'.[84]

Along with Eden, Exodus is the other great theme of *The Principle of Hope*, drawn up into the vast section on 'religious mystery'.[85] And, within the discussion of Exodus, Moses is a key figure.[86] Here, Bloch wants a distinct, flesh-and-religious leader over against the tendency towards a legendary Moses in biblical scholarship at the time.[87] He grasps the real hand of Moses and draws him out of myth, for Moses signals the first religion that began not in astral myth but with rebellion. Moses is thus the 'first *heros eponymos*, the first name-giving originator of a religion, of a religion of opposition'; [88]'The earliest leader of a people out of slavery … the first distinctive founder'.[89] Moses and the Exodus become the archetype of all other religions that began with rebellion. Not only this, Moses is for Bloch the 'earliest leader of a people out of slavery' per se, religious or otherwise.[90] Add to this the primitive communism

---

[83] Bloch 1995, p. 1126; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1324.
[84] Bloch 1995, p. 1132; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1331.
[85] Bloch 1995, pp. 1183–1311; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 1392–1540.
[86] Bloch 1995, pp. 1231–41; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 1450–64.
[87] Or the scholarship of a few years earlier: Bloch refers to a work by Jeremias of 1905 and the more well known Budde of 1900 and Wellhausen of 1901 (see Bloch 1995, pp. 1231–2; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 1251–2). Given that *The Principle of Hope* was written between 1938 and 1947, albeit on the basis of earlier notes, these references are somewhat dated.
[88] Bloch 1995, p. 1232; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1453.
[89] Bloch 1995, p. 1230; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1450.
[90] Ibid.

of the bedouin-type existence of the first Israelites Moses led and we have the prime conditions for the kind of religion Bloch would find congenial.[91] Yet the Yahweh of the Exodus Bloch finds with Moses is opposed to another image of God: the high 'lord-god', the god of rabbis and Canaanites and priestly privilege, who is equivalent to Baal, the 'lord' (which is precisely what 'Baal' means) of all. But all of this is not what the Exodus God signifies: 'The God of exodus is different in nature, in the prophets he proved his hostility to lords and opium'.[92] This God is ultimately the God of the future: 'Ich werde sein, der ich sein werde', 'I will be who I will be',[93] the Hebrew *Eh'je ascher eh'je* that he transcribed in this fashion and used as a leitmotiv throughout his work.

Atheism in Christianity focuses on Exodus in much greater detail, although, here, the troubling fixation on Moses shifts to Exodus itself. It constitutes the motif of the 'exodus out of Yahweh', that is, the move out of a Yahweh who is an ideological sanction of priestly power. This Exodus out of Yahweh recurs throughout the Hebrew Bible. Thus, the serpent in Genesis 3 fascinates him – 'the most outstanding passage in the whole of the "underground" Bible',[94] and he will trace this theme later with regard to the Ophites. Drawn into the net is Jacob's wrestling with God in Genesis 32 (El, on this occasion, and not Yahweh), Exodus 4: 24–6 where Yahweh attempts to kill Moses and is appeased by circumcision, Genesis 11 and the rebellion of the Tower of Babel, and the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. In each case, a bloodthirsty, vengeful God is outdone by cunning human beings keen to avoid his fury, whether that is listening to the serpent and gaining knowledge of good and evil, or wrestling with a God who is unwilling to bless.

The problem that emerges here, however, has already been signalled by my note on Genesis 32 and El. For the Hebrew Bible contains not one God, Yahweh, but a host of divinities with various names – El, El Shaddai, El Roi, Baal, Adonai, Elohim, Yahweh and so on. Bloch, it seems, is aware of this, for, instead of selecting his preferred divinity, he argues that it allows for alternative possibilities in the concept of Yahweh: 'The change-ability exhibited by the divine lord-of-the-manor and exactor of tribute shows that there is in fact

---

[91] Bloch 1995, p. 496; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 575.
[92] Bloch 1995, p. 1235; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1457.
[93] Bloch 1995, p. 1236; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1457, quoting Exodus 3: 14.
[94] Bloch 1972, p. 86; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 117.

a very changeable, movable factor in the concept of Yahweh himself'.[95] He even offers a brief history of God from the Kenite tribal god to a monotheistic figure which enables him to argue for the 'peculiar mutability'[96] in the concept of god. And out of the mix he finds a god oriented to the future, who leaves behind every previous conception of god. But, here, we have the residue of liberal theology's 'ethical monotheism' – despite his polemic against the 'watery soul of fire of so-called liberal Protestantism'[97] – as the highest expression of religion in the Hebrew Bible found at few points such as prophets like Isaiah. Except that Bloch gives it his own twist, one oriented to the future destined for atheistic oblivion.

If his interest in the serpent and the alternative concept of Yahweh is a little quirky, then his zeal for the Nazirites and prophets is straight out of the Protestant Reformation. The Nazirites call the people back to the nomadic, bedouin-like life of wilderness over against the settled agricultural life of Canaan with its Baals and priests. And, from the Nazirites, with their vows of asceticism and bans on alcohol and hair-cutting, emerge the prophets, for whom Bloch has nothing but praise all the way from the foaming shamans of the books of Samuel and Kings to the considered, rational prophecy of the writing prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve. Such prophecy brings about 'the momentous union of *social preaching* and the *will for a new Yahweh and a coming of his Day*'.[98] 'After the God of Exodus [*Auszugsgott*], the *second great ideal* of theology is Yahweh as the embodiment of moral reason'.[99] All of the pre-agrarian, primitive-communist memories are brought forth in the prophets.

The climax of this vast coverage of the Hebrew Bible is the book of Job – the voiced protest against an unjust and oppressive God.[100] On his way to Job, however, Bloch appropriates many contested positions in biblical studies. Thus, he accepts the historicity of the Exodus from Egypt, Moses as a key figure in that escape, a distinct people of Israel who conquer Canaan and establish kingship – all to argue for the conditions of change in the concept of God.

---

[95] Bloch 1972, p. 92; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 122.
[96] 'Besondere Wandelbarkeit'; Bloch 1972, p. 93; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 124.
[97] Bloch 1991, p. 369; Bloch 1985, Volume 4, p. 405.
[98] Bloch 1972, p. 99; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 19.
[99] Bloch 1972, p. 104; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 135.
[100] Bloch does puzzle over Job's final submission, ruminating on the possibility that the poet knew no other way to finish.

Here, he must take the text as reliable evidence, for there is no other evidence for these positions. In fact, if we think of Romulus and Remus for Rome, or the Iliad for Greece, let alone *Enuma Elish* from Babylon, the narrative from Exodus to conquest is much better understood as a political myth with little basis in historical events. And so we can apply Bloch's own strictures on myth. What if, to take a growing consensus in biblical studies and archaeology, Israel emerges late from within Canaan, a small moment in the history of Palestine, submerged under empires (Persian, Hellenistic and Roman) and only achieving late independence under the Maccabees in the third century BCE? Further, Bloch assumes positions in biblical criticism that are drawn from the text, especially the opposition between nomadic and settled and that between Yahwism and its Canaanite counterparts. But what are the implications for Yahwism if it is, in fact, one form of Canaanite religion? At the time Bloch was writing, assumptions of Israelite uniqueness dominated work on the Hebrew Bible, as a people, as the inventors of history over against myth, as the producers of a much higher form of religion, as those who led the way forward over against the stultifying effects of Canaanite and Egyptian religion, culture and even architecture.[101]

My final question for Bloch concerns his rather astute observations on myth that I discussed a little earlier, along with the issue of sources and oral tradition. To be sure, the material about the serpent, or about Jacob wrestling with God, or Cain and Abel, or the Tower of Babel, or even Job, fall into the category of myth, or at least legend, and Bloch's treatment lives up to his discernment of myth. Let me take as examples Genesis 3 on the serpent and Chapter 4 on Cain and Abel. After noting the ambiguity of the serpent figure – poison and healing, dragon of the abyss and lightning high above, healer from leprosy and so on – Bloch zeroes in on a feature of the text long noticed: the serpent speaks with a straight tongue. Thus, in response to Eve's observation that touching the tree in the middle of the garden will lead to death, the serpent replies, 'You will not die; for God [*Elohim*] knows that on the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods [*Elohim*], knowing good and evil' (Gen 3: 4–5). Not only does God or the gods [*Elohim*] admit, in verse 22, that the human beings have gained the knowledge of good and evil and become like gods, but Adam and Eve are banished from the garden rather

[101] See Bloch 2000, pp. 20–6; Bloch 1985, Volume 3, pp. 32–40.

than killed – they do not die. In fact, the risk reverses and the gods fear that the man 'might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever' (Gen 3: 22). And what is the result of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? 'And the eyes of the two of them were opened' (3: 7). What follows, in verses 8–19, is, for Bloch, a mythical overlay of the sort that he finds objectionable, a redactor's narrative that turns the act of eating from the tree of knowledge into punishment for disobedience, although, even here, the punishment – for the serpent, a legless existence; for the woman, pain in childbirth and subservience to her man; for the man, hard labour from a resistant and thorny ground – hints at the sort of punishment meted out to rebels and revolutionaries. Were it not for this high-handed punishment, it is not clear that eating from the tree, desiring knowledge, wanting to be like gods, is an act of rebellion at all, let alone the sin that theology found there. In other words, the hand of a redactor, an orthodox priestly apparatchik, turns an older source into a story of the punishment for disobedience. But Bloch's point is that the earlier source is still visible, as biblical critics are wont to argue for slightly different reasons. The seams and tensions in the text point to different sources that have been brought together, except that Bloch's hermeneutics of class conflict leads him to argue that the tension reflects one between rulers and the repression of rebellion by those ruled. Bloch's espies an echo of earlier resistance in the earliest E source (the name Yahweh Elohim is used) of Genesis 2: 3–7 that lies at the basis of this account.[102]

Bloch's interest in the serpent carries right through to the Gnostic-Christian sect of the third century CE, the Ophites (*ophis*: snake). Fragmented and distorted as the information is, coming only through the anti-heretical texts of the Church Fathers such as Hippolytus and Irenaeus, Bloch stresses the way they offered an alternative exegesis of the serpent texts: Moses's staff that turned into a serpent (Ex 4: 2–5; 6: 8–12); the wise logos of Eve in Genesis 3; the mark of Cain and Cain himself in Genesis 4; the bronze serpent set up by Moses in the desert for healing (Num 21: 4–9); and Christ. The serpent of Genesis thus becomes the source of life and reason, saving Adam and Eve from a god who is no more than a demiurge, a deity who created this world and from whom human beings had to escape. Bloch then pursues other texts, such as

[102] Gen 3: 8–24 come from the later JE source (which uses the name Yahweh Elohim for God) and the whole lot has then been reworked by a priestly redactor.

that concerning Nehushtan in 2 Kings 18: 4, the bronze serpent worshipped by the people and attributed to Moses until its destruction by King Hezekiah, or the text from John 3: 14, 'And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up' – although he neglects to mention the verse that immediately follows, 'that whoever believes in him may have eternal life' (John 3: 15). In the end, the God who punishes Christ with crucifixion is the same one who punishes the serpent and the first humans in Genesis 3. With the Parousia, Christ will return like the snake of lightning, destroying the world that the Demiurge had made. For Bloch, this 'a rebellion myth second to none',[103] and he ponders why it disappeared, why it was stripped of any serious political dimensions by the Church Fathers. And then, in his characteristic encyclopaedic fashion, Bloch traces the serpent through to the 530 CE decree by Justinian against Ophite doctrine, the possibility that the Marcionites worshipped the serpent, its presence on the eucharistic cup in the Middle Ages, the decorations found on Templar churches and in baroque Bibles, and even Nietzsche's rebellion.[104] But what he misses is the fact that the Hebrew word *Seraph* or *Seraphim* also means serpent, deriving from the winged cobra of the representations of the Pharaohs and Egyptian deities. The serpent, it seems, is even more prevalent in the Bible than he thought.[105]

A second excellent example of Bloch's 'discernment of myths' comes with his discussion of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. Here, he spots a 'half-concealed break in the picture of this God'[106] where the issue is acceptable sacrifice. Abel's sacrifice of the fat portions of the firstling of the flock is acceptable, but Cain's offering of the fruit of the ground is not. Here, we have a bloodthirsty deity who requires the blood of animals as a substitute for human blood. After the murder of Yahweh's favoured Abel by Cain, the picture of Yahweh transforms into something quite different. Usually, the text that follows the murder – with its story of the mark of Cain to distinguish him from others – is read as the curse of Cain. He has, after all, killed his brother in a rage of jealousy, sin lying at the door as a result of Cain's fallen face (Gen 4: 6 and 7). Bloch, however, exploits a break in the Masoretic text in verse 8: 'And Cain said to his brother Abel … And when they were in the field, Cain rose up

---

[103] Bloch 1972, p. 186; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 233.
[104] Bloch 1991, p. 331; Bloch 1985, Volume 4, pp. 365–6.
[105] See further on this, Landy 1999.
[106] Bloch 1972, p. 90; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 120.

against his brother Abel, and killed him'. This syntactical blip alerts Bloch to a change in the representations of Cain and Yahweh. The nervousness of the other versions (Samaritan Pentateuch, Septuagint, Syriac, Vulgate and others) which add 'Let us go out into the field' points to a problem in the Hebrew – it simply does not make sense at this point.

The change in Cain is one thing: he is either a crestfallen man because his sacrifice was unacceptable, or a murderer. But Bloch is drawn by the break in the picture of God. On the one hand, we have the dystopian, bloodthirsty Yahweh who places a curse on Cain – 'And now cursed are you from the ground, which has opened its mouth to take the blood of your brother from your hand. When you cultivate the ground it will no longer give you its strength; a fugitive and wanderer you will be upon the earth' (Gen 4: 11–12, my translation). Yet, the text relents in mid stream: 'Yahweh not only modifies his curse, but withdraws it. Instead of an imperial ban on the outlaw, what comes, as though from a different source, is quite the opposite'.[107] The mark of Cain is then a mark of protection, and Cain is blessed with a long line of fruitful and productive offspring – city-builders, tent dwellers, livestock owners, lyre and pipe players, bronze and iron tool manufacturers.

But, had he been able to read Hebrew, Bloch would have picked up another textual problem. In Gen 4: 15, he quotes Yahweh's words in the text as 'Not so! If anyone slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold'.[108] But, here, the 'not so!' follows the various versions (Greek, Latin and Syriac) rather than the Masoretic (Hebrew) text, which has 'Therefore [*lkn*]', following on from Cain's plea, 'I shall be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth, and anyone who meets me may kill me' (Gen 4: 14). Therefore, says Yahweh, Cain's killer will be avenged sevenfold, and for this reason the mark is a mark of protection, not punishment. Finally, Bloch lets pass in silence the verse that follows, for Cain with his sign of protection departs from 'the face of Yahweh' (Gen 4: 16). Is this not precisely the exodus out of Yahweh that Bloch seeks?

These are among the best examples of Bloch's method, sorting out tensions and contradictions in biblical myths. However, at other points, he is not so discerning. For, when it comes to a pinch, he leaves myth behind, keen to espy the historical Moses behind the various myths that waft around him,

---

[107] Bloch 1972, p. 90; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 121.
[108] Ibid.

or the concrete historical context of wilderness nomadism and the conquest of Canaan. At times, he loses his mythical nerve, wanting Moses to be more than myth. Of course, the catch is that one of the most likely forms of myth is of the great man (at least) of history and faith. He will do the same thing with Jesus.

New Testament

Bloch's enthusiastic appropriation of the New Testament has not got the quirky edge of his reading of the Hebrew Bible. As before, I move through *The Principle of Hope* before returning to *Atheism in Christianity*. Of course, he will zero in on Jesus, one in a long line of prophets that even includes Zoroaster, Mani and Buddha. But, like Moses, Jesus must be a historical figure struggling to escape his mythical background.[109] Bloch wants to establish the fullest revolutionary credentials of Jesus, who provides the basis for social utopia. So he focuses on Jesus's 'downward attraction', towards the poor, and his 'upward rebellion against above', against the powerful. In the end, wealth prevents salvation, and the love-communism of the early community (comparable to primitive communism under Moses) provides the model of a new society. After his glowing appreciation of Jesus, Bloch finds the scandal of Christian love central: 'This is Christian love, a love which is almost micrological, one which gathers up its own in their out-of-the-wayness, their incognito to the world, their discordance with the world: *into the kingdom where they accord*'.[110] Along with love, Jesus's apocalypticism marks him as a revolutionary and as the sign of the 'perfection of the exodus god into the god of the kingdom'.[111] Of all things, Bloch treasures biblical apocalypticism highest of all.

Jesus's revolutionary credentials become central in *Atheism in Christianity* – Bloch stresses the words of fury and divisiveness, sword and fire. He is, however, not the first to argue for Jesus the political revolutionary, for it has been a constant theme in various popular and scholarly Christologies. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, Bloch's zeal for Jesus the revolutionary firebrand has been influential in political theologies in Europe (most notably Jürgen Moltmann

[109] Bloch 1995, pp. 1256–65; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, pp. 1482–93.
[110] Bloch 1995, p. 1262; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1490.
[111] Bloch 1995, p. 1265; Bloch 1985, Volume 5, p. 1493.

and Johann Baptist Metz)[112] and liberation theologies in Latin America and elsewhere. Compared to these theologies, Bloch gives no quarter to liberal, interiorising anti-Semitic Christologies of Renan, Holtzmann, Wellhausen and von Harnack, particularly when he connects their work with the transcendentalising tendencies within the New Testament.

But the most curious aspect of his treatment of Jesus in *Atheism in Christianity* is the mix of mythical and historical features. Like *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch undertakes his own search for the historical Jesus, and, in doing so, he follows the dominant pattern of such research in biblical scholarship at the time, namely speculation about the New-Testament titles of Jesus: Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, *kyrios* (lord), and so on. And like that research, his wants to identify the titles closest to Jesus's own usage, to gain access to his psychological processes. Bloch's prefers both Messiah and Son of Man: 'Subjectively, then, Jesus considered himself the Messiah in the thoroughly traditional sense; objectively he is anything but an artful dodger into invisible inwardness, or a sort of quartermaster for a totally transcendent heavenly Kingdom'.[113] But the enigmatic and apocalyptic 'Son of Man' is closest to Jesus, the one most often on his lips, giving expression to his anti-Yahwistic drive, the desire for human transcendence. Yet, in pursuing the Son of Man through the Hebrew Bible and extra-canonical material, Bloch is squarely in the realm of myth, whether the suffering, dying and returning apocalyptic figure or the heavenly man or Adam, Adam Kadmon of Jewish mythology, and the second Adam of other New Testament theology. And, here, he falls into the trap that his method promised to avoid: on the one hand, he tries to sidestep the myth that seeps through the New Testament, arguing that Son of Man is a real term used by a flesh-and-blood Jesus; on the other, it is a designation that runs back to the earliest precursors of the priestly source in Genesis 1, to the figure of Adam made in the image and likeness of God: 'In the final analysis, then, the doctrine of the Heavenly Adam as the prototype of man belongs to the biblical Azores: to the remaining mountain-peak of a submerged, subversive, anti-theocratic tradition'.[114]

---

[112] Metz 1969, Metz 1980, Jürgen Moltmann, especially in his first major text, Moltmann 1982.

[113] Bloch 1972, pp. 129–30; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 176.

[114] Bloch 1972, p. 150; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 195.

I am not so sure, for not only would Bloch have been on better ground if he had argued that the myth of a revolutionary Jesus is one that undermines those of the Kyrios-Christos and the transcendent, eternal Adam. Of course, Bloch would argue that this is a manifestation of the god principle, an expression of the human desire for self-transcendence beyond religious ideology. But the problem runs deeper than this, which involves both the difficulties of secularising theology and the elevation of man onto God's former throne. I will return to these questions below.

All the same, Bloch's enthusiasm for Jewish and Christian materials is striking. One can sense the immense value he accords Moses and Jesus, Christian love and apocalypticism, but, above all, their revolutionary credentials. Is he, then, too sympathetic to religion, too blind to the atrocities and complicities with the powerful that Christianity has manifested, as his critics in East Germany insisted? It seems to me that, for all his shortcomings in biblical criticism and in Marxist theory, the crucial question that exercised Bloch is why such a text was the main inspiration for the various revolutionary groups throughout European history. I have already raised this question earlier, but it remains central to some of Bloch's final moves.

The return to theology

In the closing arguments of both *Atheism in Christianity* and *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch returns to theology, albeit in his argument for the atheistic logic of the Bible. Yet this argument is, to my mind, the most symptomatic of all, for his theological turn raises all sorts of questions about the nature of his biblical criticism. Note carefully that the title of his most sustained engagement with the Bible is not *Atheism in the Bible*, but *Atheism in Christianity*, *Atheismus im Christentum*. And the questions Bloch covers in its closing pages are the theological ones of atheism, teleology, transcendence, sin and death.

Here, we witness perhaps the boldest and most risky move of all – a dialectical inversion of the central doctrines of Christianity, a homeopathic reading that pushes the concepts to their extreme until their 'truth' emerges. After running through the impossibility of the biblical exodus out of Yahweh in Orphic, Stoic and Gnostic beliefs, Bloch returns to what is now a theological opposition in continuity with the two lines he traces in the Bible: astral myth and logos myth. If astral myth – in which the fundamental stasis of the cosmos

remains untouched – provides no way forward, the logos myth allows him to begin a transvaluation of one theological category after the other.[115]

Atheism

Bloch's well-known 'religious atheism' is not some soft-headed reversion to paganism. Like Žižek after him, Bloch fully endorses the break with paganism enacted, as he sees it, in the Bible. Lumped under the sign of 'astral myth' – chthonian matriarchal religions of the moon, fertility cults of the dying and rising god, patriarchal religions of the sun, Canaanite and Greek myths, cyclical fertility myths – Bloch notes both the biblical leftovers and the Bible's ability to cut through the whole seduction of paganism. And his argument is that the Bible first enables human beings to face the realm of divinised heavenly bodies and not fear, as the angels say to the shepherds in Luke's birth story.

Bloch's hero is Feuerbach, who enables human beings to begin to claim the heavens for themselves by arguing that the gods are transposed hypostases of human desires. Feuerbach's genius is that he focused on 'the radically human line in Christianity'.[116] Through his 'anthropologisation' (or, as Moylan calls it, 'dehypostatization'),[117] Feuerbach put forward a distinctly utopian image of human beings, a *homo absconditus* who yet awaits full emergence. Only possible by passing through Christianity, 'Feuerbach's atheism, then, aimed both to destroy a strength-sapping illusion, and to fan the transforming flames which would change the theologically created infinity of man back into a truly human one'.[118]

But what kind of atheism is this? Not the moral atheism of the Enlightenment in which the problem of theodicy led to the conclusion that God could not exist in the face of undeserved suffering, nor is it historical, psychological or poetic atheism that Bloch notes as possible answers to the questions posed in the book of Job – for an unfeeling, cruel universe exists with or without

[115] See also Bloch 2000, pp. 212–18; Bloch 1985, Volume 3, pp. 267–72.
[116] Bloch 1972, p. 210; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 281.
[117] Moylan 1997, p. 105.
[118] Bloch 1972, p. 211; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 282.

God.[119] What interests Bloch is the Utopian drive beyond inhumanity, and atheism must deal with the same group of theodicical questions.

> Can there be no understanding of the harsh clash of misery and the drive to overcome it, no insight into exploitation and its progressive dialectics? And does not dialectical materialism itself need some justification for invoking such a dreary and repulsive process? Where does this realm of necessity come from, with all its long oppression? Why is the realm of freedom not suddenly there? Why must it work its way with so much bloodshed through necessity? Why the long delay?[120]

What he decries are both the 'unrealistic folly of optimism' and the 'equally unhistorical nihilism'[121] that are characteristic of so many forms of atheism. Rather, atheism protests not merely against a god who is responsible for these things but that they exist at all. For this reason, the religious revolutionaries draw him in: prophets, mystics, religious founders, particularly Moses and Jesus, and the theological revolutionaries like Münzer. So the exodus out of Yahweh then becomes a model for another exodus: 'there is always an exodus in the world, and exodus from the particular *status quo*. And there is always a hope, which is connected with rebellion – a hope founded in the concrete given possibilities for a new beginning'.[122]

Yet the 'protest atheism' Bloch seeks has its first moment in the Bible. Of course, atheism is, in one sense, not possible in a world that lives and breathes the sacred, such as we find in the Bible, but Bloch finds there the seeds of a trajectory – Bloch quotes Romans 5: 5; 8: 18; 1 Corinthians 2: 9 and Ephesians 4: 13 – that only comes to full realisation well beyond the Bible – in the atheistic messianism of Marxism:

> The existence of God, indeed God at all as a special being is superstition; belief is solely that in a messianic kingdom of God – without God. Atheism is therefore so far from being the enemy of religious utopia that it constitutes its precondition: *without atheism messianism has no place*….

---

[119] See Bloch 1972, pp. 120–22; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, pp. 164–6.
[120] Bloch 1972, p. 121; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, pp. 164–5.
[121] Bloch 1972, p. 121; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 165.
[122] Bloch 1972, pp. 121–2; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 165.

> Atheism is the presupposition of any concrete Utopia, but concrete Utopia is also the remorseless consequence of atheism. Atheism-with-concrete-Utopia is at one and the same time the annihilation of religion and the realisation of its heretical hope, now set on human feet.[123]

Teleology

The catch with all of this, as many have argued, is its over-riding teleology – another theological category Bloch seeks to transvalue into historical materialism. Unfortunately, Bloch rests heavily on early twentieth-century biblical scholarship, which argued that the Bible broke decisively with the cyclical time of its Ancient Near-Eastern context. Instead, we find, they argued, the first moment of linear, historical time in the Hebrew Bible, something Bloch turns all too quickly into his teleology. And then, in a massive rush, Bloch draws in nearly everything from the earliest documents of the Bible to Hegel, an encyclopaedic sweep we see repeatedly in his texts. But the distinction between two times is highly problematic, not merely since we find both perceptions of time in the Bible and in the Ancient Near East, but also because it imposes foreign categories on the text. And I cannot help but think that Bloch's call for a discernment of myths should have made him much more wary.

Many have found teleology the most troublesome aspect of Bloch's thought. Moylan, for instance, argues that it shows a rift between his rigid Marxist teleology and a more fragmentary, disruptive utopian expectation. Moylan favours the latter, which he feels under the teleology.[124] I am not sure it is so easy to make this distinction, since utopia is, for Bloch, a temporal and historical concept. If anything, what we need is a dialectical treatment that would see both as mutually necessary. Yet, it seems to me that Bloch's debt is less to Stalinist orthodoxy, as Moylan suggests, than the systematising temptations of theological categories over the more variegated biblical material. For the whole idea of teleology is more theological than biblical, and Bloch elides chiliasm and teleology, assuming a massive continuity that constitutes a pro-

---

[123] Bloch 1972, p. 240; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 317.

[124] Moylan 1997, pp. 112–13. Moylan problematically turns this critique into one that valorises liberal plurality over against communist totality.

found problem. On the one hand, it is not possible to ignore the theological content of the Bible; and yet, the assumption that the Bible is part of a larger theological discourse ignores the rifts between the Bible and theology, the appropriation of a literary text by a religious tradition that did not produce it. Beneath all of this is not only my argument that it is necessary to develop a non-theological biblical criticism, but that theology creates more problems for biblical criticism than possibilities and opportunities. In other words, Bloch's value is that he raises the theological issues in biblical interpretation, but the catch is that his reading of the Bible is limited by unexamined theological assumptions.

Transcendence

As we have seen, Bloch takes the category of transcendence into new territories, human, non-human and temporal. Thus, while God's transcendence is but a code for human transcendence (*deus absconditus* actually means *homo absconditus*), it becomes a temporal transcendence, oriented to the future. But Bloch does not stop here, for even nature and matter have utopian pretensions. If certain moments of Western philosophy have spoken of self-transcendence from matter, from Aristotle's *dynameion*, 'being-in-possibility', to the 'earthly spirits' of Avicebron, then, for the Bible, the Eschaton descends into this world: 'nowhere is the Omega of Christian utopianism so untranscendent and at the same time so all-transcending, as in the "New Jerusalem" of Revelation 21.23'.[125] In all this, he prefers the Latin verbal infinitive *transcendere* to the substantive transcendence, for, whereas the latter indicates a state, the former speaks of a forward-looking process, a paradoxical *transcendere* without transcendence.[126]

Bloch is obviously trying to stretch Marx's critique of mechanical materialism beyond its original shape. However, is not the effort to reload key theological terms like transcendence not caught up in the difficulties of secularised theology? This will become a central question for Adorno, but it is relevant here too. Such theological terms are not so easily divested of their semantic associations, for their content is not like milk in a bottle which one

[125] Bloch 1972, p. 229; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 303; translation corrected.
[126] See Bloch 1972, pp. 237–9; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, pp. 315–17.

can merely pour out and replace, say, with wine. No matter how unrelenting the effort to remove any former content, a residue remains that clings to the terms. Adorno urges us not to relax our ideological suspicion for a moment, but Bloch can be caught napping all too often. This brings me to two related points. The first is theological: the elevation of 'man' in God's place, or matter in place of spirit, has all the potential for totalitarian and oppressive politics that can now be justified by such an ideology, for this 'man' can behave as though he were God. There is, as Moylan points out in a different context, a tendency for Bloch to revert to the hypostatisation he elsewhere criticises so well.[127] And it happens when he moves from the discernment of biblical myths to overtly theological categories, for he seems to give up his carefully crafted discernment of myths at the same time. Should not his arguments for human transcendence, and, indeed, his teleological atheism, also be subject to the suspicion that he casts over myths of servile obedience and the justification of earthly lords? For the danger of secularised theology is to replicate those patterns of ideological justification of power and authority so characteristic of theology itself.

Faith, hope, sin and death

Bloch continues to roll one theological category out after another, including faith, hope and sin. But the most intriguing are his thoughts on death. There is nothing all that new in his comments on faith and hope – openness to an undecided future characterised by discontented hope. Bloch's insistence on the notions of evil and the 'Satanic' within Marxism are welcome but, again, not particularly new. But his point is valid: with atheism God's protagonist and his allies disappear as well and evil becomes unidentifiable. Such a diminution, a reduction to psychological or economic causes, is evil's greatest triumph, for it can do its work unnoticed. So Bloch calls for a doctrine of evil within Marxism, one that recognises how trenchant the opposition may be to socialism.

But I am fascinated by his reflections on death, the most honest of any Marxist that I have seen. For Bloch, 'death depicts the hardest anti-utopia'.[128]

---

[127] Moylan 1997, pp. 115–16.
[128] Bloch and Adorno 1988, p. 9.

As 'a highly inadequate end, generally breaking, only very rarely rounding off, the human life',[129] it saps the energy of anyone who sets out to change the world.[130] Death is, as David Roberts pointed out to me in discussion, the point where any materialist position faces its hardest task. Eschewing a solution in a collective notion of continued life, Bloch distinguishes between the act of dying, which is itself part of life, and death as the resultant state. The former generates the odd apprehension, but the ontological status of death engenders sheer horror. So Bloch seeks a source of courage in the look forward to the *Novum*: death ought to be viewed as a departure, an open question. Interested in neither the 'positive dogmatism' of Christianity or a materialist 'dogmatic negativity', he comes out as an agnostic regarding death: the journey is simply an unknown, and anyone who attempts to say what actually takes place has another agenda. Rather than the traditional image of the resurrection to a new life or, indeed, the retrospection that immanent death produces, he stresses that death should be regarded as an open question for which we have no answers.[131] Atheism, therefore, does not preclude the possibility of something beyond death, for 'the *status viae* lies far beyond death, which hardly represents an inflexibly formative *status termini*'.[132]

And yet, Bloch wants to do more than that, invoking the notion of 'life force [*Lebensmuts*]', a potential or capability for reaching beyond the limits of an

---

[129] Bloch 1972, p. 249; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 329; see also the discussion in Bloch 2000, pp. 255–66; Bloch 1985, Volume 3, pp. 318–31.

[130] In their fascinating discussion, 'Something's Missing', Adorno also argues that one of the key questions for a utopian consciousness is the possibility that people no longer have to die (Bloch and Adorno 1988, p. 8).

[131] So also Adorno in the discussion with Bloch: 'I believe that without the notion of an unfettered life, freed from death, the idea of utopia, the idea of the utopia, cannot even be thought at all.... There is something profoundly contradictory in every utopia, namely, that it cannot be conceived at all without the elimination of death; this is inherent in the very thought. What I mean is the heaviness of death and everything that is connected to it. Wherever this is not included, where the threshold of death is not at the same time considered, there can actually be no utopia. And it seems to me that this has very heavy consequences for the theory of knowledge about utopia – if I may put it crassly: One may not cast a picture of utopia in a positive manner. Every attempt to describe or portray utopia in a simple way, i.e., it will be like this, would be an attempt to avoid the antinomy of death and to speak about the elimination of death as if it did not exist. That is perhaps the most profound reason, the metaphysical reason, why one can actually talk about utopia only in a negative way, as is demonstrated in great philosophical works by Hegel and, even more emphatically, Marx'. Bloch and Adorno 1988, p. 10.

[132] Bloch 2000, p. 265; Bloch 1985, Volume 3, p. 330.

individual life. It is, in other words, 'the courage to break free from this devil's guesthouse, this world'.[133] Human beings can come close to this potential only in a utopian, i.e. socialist environment where the as yet unimagined social and economic conditions will enable human transformation. This, in fact, runs close to Marx's notion of species essence and the transformation of that essence in communism. In the end, Bloch provides here a materialist translation of another theological concept – resurrection. Eternal life, then, may be understood not as an answer to death but as the 'deep presence of something that has not yet appeared'.[134]

The weaker version of this necessary but astonishing effort to deal with death would be that human beings contain within them a utopian desire, and the value of religions like Christianity is that they have tapped into this. However, I suspect that Bloch pushes towards a stronger version, in which a collective socialist transformation that has not yet arrived will provide the context for the realisation of such a life-force, a society that was itself brought about as the result of that life-force. Of course, there are a pile of questions – will people still long for a greater transformation? Is such a life-force itself not generated by the religions in question? And so on – but what interests me is the effort to transform a theological category into a viable historical-materialist category.

Most commentators have been nonplussed by all the discussion of death and life-force. Geoghegan feels that he shuffles about too much, while Roberts suspects that Bloch must rely on some form of religious mystery.[135] As I have argued, Bloch's arresting move is to argue that atheism does not necessarily mean that death is final, and conversely that religion does not have a monopoly on death. He is, in the end, agnostic on the question of the fate of the individual after death.

What we have, then, in the final two chapters of *Atheism in Christianity*, is a brief systematic theology that seeks 'to inherit those features of religion which do not perish with the death of God'.[136] Yet what Bloch wants is not the abolition of Christianity within Marxism, but a mutually transforming alliance in some utopian future. An 'alliance between revolution and Christianity', the

---

[133] Bloch 1972, p. 252; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 332.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Roberts 1987, especially p. 108.
[136] Bloch 1972, p. 266; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 347.

'table of labor' and the 'table of the Lord'[137] on the model of the peasant wars, would enable a Christianity in touch with its origins in religious freedom and a Marxism in touch with its roots.[138]

Conclusion

> But enough of this religious imagery.[139]

I must admit that I am in two minds, caught in Bloch's materialist enthusiasm, but suspicious of how he fails to live up to his own method, particularly his key category of the discernment of myth. Not merely the acumen required to differentiate between myths of subversion and submission, it is more the dialectical insight that myths of insurrection appear in the midst of myths of domination. But, too often, he strays from this strategy, and I want suggest that he does so when theological concerns begin to over-ride his biblical criticism. For the discernment of myth emerges in his analysis of biblical material, but it falls away when he reverts to theology. And this is the problem: he takes the Bible and theology as two parts of the same endeavour,[140] with the result that theological categories begin to dominate his biblical interpretation. Here, Bloch's discernment of myth loses its nerve.

Let me tease out this criticism. The structure of both *The Principle of Hope* and *Atheism in Christianity* runs from the Bible to a full-scale theological reflection. Thus, in the last two chapters of *Atheism of Christianity*, he waxes increasingly theological and the biblical references fade away, serving nothing more than as proof texts for the theological points. While, in some cases, the points Bloch makes in the theological sections are thought-provoking, not least because Christianity and Marxism are the two great systems, as Jameson reminds us,[141] that have been state ideologies, I want to suggest that Bloch's programme would have been served better if he had made a sharper distinction between theology and the Bible.

---

[137] Bloch 2000, p. 246; Bloch 1985, Volume 3, p. 307; see also Bloch 1986, pp. 276–80; Bloch 1985, Volume 6, pp. 310–14.

[138] Bloch 1986, pp. 158–9; Bloch 1985, Volume 6, pp. 181–2.

[139] Bloch 1972, p. 263; Bloch 1985, Volume 14, p. 344.

[140] To often, commentators on Bloch do the same thing. See, for instance, Raulet 1983.

[141] Jameson 1971, pp. 117–18.

But what is the problem with secularised theology? Here, Adorno's comment to Bloch may be applied to his whole utopian project: 'We have come strangely close to the ontological proof of God'.[142] This comes in response to Bloch's comment, 'one should not be allowed to eliminate it as if it really did not exist'.[143] All of Bloch's categories, such as the anticipatory illumination [*Vor-Schein*],[144] 'not-yet consciousness', 'life-force', yearning for a better life and so on become variations of a secularised version of Anselm's 'that than which a greater cannot be thought'. It is not for nothing that 'God' becomes, in the words of *The Spirit of Utopia*, 'the problem of the radically new, absolutely redemptive, as the phenomenal of our freedom, of our true meaning'.[145] The risk of idolatry in such a secularised theology is almost unavoidable, as we will see with Adorno.

The implication of the seamless connection between Bible and theology is that Bloch grants a crucial point before the debate has begun, namely that the home for the Bible is the Church (understanding theology as the central ideological structure of the Church). Such a move must be regarded, like his deal with the Stalinist devil, as a strategic concession in order to make other gains, since Bloch is not unaware of the distinction, noting that the Bible has always been the Church's bad conscience, that it was on the basis of the Bible that the peasants under Münzer opposed the Church, and that the Church itself has too often been the dangerously hypocritical heavenly state that reinforces the earthly.[146] However much he may find protest against such régimes in the Bible, his compromise with theology sits ill with his espousal of Münzer and other Christian revolutionaries.

I would much rather that Bloch had allowed his politicised biblical criticism loose on theology. I think of the discernment of myths along class lines, between those that encourage servility and those that enable human beings to stand up to the powers that oppress. Is not this kind of discernment necessary in his readings of theology? These debates might continue, but, in the end, Bloch drops his ideological guard too often, especially in regard to theology, and it is precisely here that it is needed.

---

[142] Bloch and Adorno 1988, p. 16.
[143] Bloch and Adorno 1988, p. 15.
[144] See Zipes 1992, pp. 10–14.
[145] Bloch 2000, p. 201; Bloch 1985, Volume 3, p. 254.
[146] Bloch 1986, pp. 277–9; Bloch 1985,Volume 6, pp. 311–14.

Chapter Two

Benjamin's Perpetuation of Biblical Myth

> The question thus becomes that of interpreting how 'theological concepts', whether direct or indirect, function in the writings of Benjamin.[1]

After the millenarian enthusiasm of Bloch's engagement with the Bible, Benjamin emerges as a wary and cautious interlocutor. I will argue that the Bible is crucial for Benjamin's thought. Put succinctly, he seeks to use the Bible and the methods of biblical studies, especially allegory, in order to break out of the myths that he saw everywhere around him in the increasing technological interlacings of capitalism. That he fails to see the way his theological reading of the Bible perpetuates the very myth he wishes to banish is not a mark of failure as the hint at another way of dealing with myth. Over against the dominant trend to deal with Benjamin's thought chronologically, tracking its shifts over time, I attempt a thematic and logical reading here. For such a reading brings out certain elements of his thought otherwise obscured in chronological readings.

Like Bloch, Walter Benjamin is something of an enigma for Marxist criticism. I suspect this is partly due to the fact that Benjamin was never quite clear about what he wanted to say, with the result that,

[1] Weber 1991, p. 467.

at the moment we think we might have pinned him down, he slips away again. But the problem for Marxism is that, while appropriating the central terms of historical materialism, Benjamin continually uses a panoply of theological terms: God, redemption, revelation, transcendence, immanence, angels, judgement, free will, evil, Satan, messiah, allegory and repeatedly the word theology itself. Indeed, it is hardly necessary to rehearse the arguments for the theological dimensions of Benjamin's writings. It is a commonplace of Benjamin criticism that his great creative tension lies in the intersections between metaphysics and materialism, theology and Marxism. It is also a commonplace to position oneself by delineating the strands of that criticism.[2] But it seems to me that the comments of Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem have rarely been surpassed except in detail. Adorno suggests that Benjamin should take the dialectical logic of his theological method to its extreme, for only in this way would a properly Marxist reading and method emerge:

> If I were to close the circle of my critique boldly here at a single stroke, as it were, then I should have to try and grasp the two extremes. A restoration of theology, or better still, a radicalization of dialectic introduced into the glowing heart of theology, would simultaneously require the utmost intensification of the social-dialectical, indeed economic, motifs.[3]

---

[2] For a detailed analysis of the reception of Benjamin's work, see McCole 1993, pp. 10–21.

[3] Adorno, Lonitz and Benjamin 1999, p. 108; Adorno 1994, p. 143. In response to the Arcades project, of which the Baudelaire section was sent to the Institute, Adorno writes: 'I think this brings me to the heart of the matter. The impression which your entire study conveys – and not only to me and my Arcades orthodoxy – is that you have here done violence upon yourself. Your solidarity with the Institute, which pleases no one more than myself, has led you to pay the kind of tributes to Marxism which appropriate neither to Marxism nor to yourself' (Adorno, Lonitz and Benjamin 1999, p. 184; Adorno 1994, p. 369). Further: 'it would also prove most beneficial to the cause of dialectical materialism and the theoretical interests represented by the Institute, if you surrendered to your own specific insights and conclusions without combining them with other ingredients, which you obviously find so distasteful to swallow that I cannot expect anything good to come of it. God knows, there is only one truth, and if your powers of intelligence can seize this one truth through categories which may seem apocryphal to you given your conception of materialism, then you will capture more of this one truth than you will ever do by employing conceptual tools that merely resist your grip at every turn. After all, there is more of this one truth in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* than there is in Bukharin's *ABC of Communism*.' (Adorno, Lonitz and Benjamin 1999, p. 284; Adorno 1994, p. 370.)

Like Scholem, although for entirely different reasons, Adorno finds the melding of theology and dialectical materialism problematic: they appear uneasy with each other, the one effacing the other in an enthusiasm for immediate political relevance only to find that the other emerges again without warning. For Scholem, Benjamin would be better off without communism,[4] although he suggests that only Benjamin would have been able to link religion and politics in a unique fashion: 'you would not be the last but perhaps the most incomprehensible victim of the confusion between religion and politics, the true relationship of which you could have been expected to bring out more clearly than anyone else'.[5] Here, Scholem joins Adorno, although with a very different direction in mind.

However, some Marxists are keen to dismiss theology,[6] while others argue for the abiding importance of theology,[7] or that his theology is the realisation of the inner logic of Marxism and its breakdown.[8] Anti-Marxists stress that his Marxism is a superficial addition to a transcendent theology,[9] or that Benjamin's interest for us lies elsewhere, as a deconstructionist, or cultural critic or philosopher.[10] Both sides are given to marking two or three shifts in Benjamin's thought: the early, theological Benjamin influenced by Scholem

---

[4] '…[I]t seems to me it is clear to any objective reader of your writings that though in recent years you have tried – frantically, if you will pardon the expression – to present your insights, some of them very far-reaching, in a phraseology that is as close as can be to the Communist kind, there (and this is what seems to me matter) an astonishing incompatibility and unconnectedness between your real and pretended modes of thought' (Scholem 1981, p. 228). For Scholem, the effort at materialist readings introduces 'a completely alien formal element that any intelligent reader can easily detach, which stamps your output of this period as the work an adventurer, a purveyor of ambiguities, and a card-sharper' (ibid.). See also, Scholem 1992, pp. 107–18, 206–7.

[5] Scholem 1981, p. 230.

[6] For a recent example, see Leslie 2000, p. 173: 'Religious motifs are one part of a versatile montage strategy, rather than evidence of ardent religious commitment. It is more significant to try to identify what theology as figure or image might represent'. One of the first English efforts in this line can be found in Eagleton 1981.

[7] Most notably Habermas 1979.

[8] See Rancière 1996, p. 38.

[9] So Britt 1996. Britt's argument for the central role of 'sacred text' or the 'scriptural function' of texts that renders them sacred in Benjamin's work is, in the end, quite superficial.

[10] As an example see the collection by Nägele 1988, as well as that by Benjamin and Osborne 2000. Paul de Man's reading is yet another variation: as Marxism and theology are on the same terrain, he seeks a reading that is neither (see Benjamin 1985). For Rainer Rochlitz (Rochlitz 1996, p. 5) Benjamin's use of 'theology' is self-reflexive, claiming 'the unconditional truth of his assertions'.

and the later (Brechtian) Marxist from the 1920s. With the *Passagenarbeit* and the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', some suggest either a resigned awareness of Marxism's futility and a return to theology (so Scholem), or an effort at a deep mutual transformation of theology through Marxism and vice versa that risks losing both,[11] or a thinking of the relationship between politics and time and thereby 'freeing theology for God',[12] or the indistinguishability,[13] or asymmetrical opposition, of the profane and the messianic,[14] or… At least these approaches avoid the pitfalls of seeking a key in his biography. I do not enter into this debate here, although we cannot avoid the mutual presence of theology and materialism in Benjamin's work.[15] For what is noticeable about the opposition is that the terseness of the interchange, like a separated couple, speaks more of the common ground between the two in a way that highlights their differences.

It is these differences and tensions that interest me here, but, before I do, let me deal with two preliminary problems. First, Benjamin and his critics subsume biblical studies under the label of theology; second, the lack of any distinction between Jewish and Christian thought. As for the second problem, most criticism assumes that Benjamin drew largely from Jewish theology. This is simply an oxymoron, for theology bears an indelible Christian stamp. Rather than theology, it is better to speak of *halakhah* – elaboration on the law – and *haggadah* – development of biblical stories for new situations.

---

[11] So Tiedemann 1989; Wolin 1982; Rumpf 1991; Buck-Morss 1989, although, in the end, she cautions that we should 'put the dwarf of theology out of sight' (252). Even Scholem, for all his criticism of Benjamin's Marxism, admits that 'This interlocking of two elements that by nature are incapable of balance lends precisely to those of Benjamin's works that derive from this attitude their significant effect and that profound brilliance that distinguishes them so impressively from most products of materialistic thought and literary criticism, noted for their uncommon dullness.' Scholem 1981, p. 124. Scholem notes that, in his last few years, Benjamin's close friend was Fritz Lieb, a theologian trained by Karl Barth and a socialist (pp. 206–7).

[12] Benjamin 2000, p. 231.

[13] Wohlfarth 1978.

[14] von Buelow 1989, p. 127.

[15] I have a knack of resisting the more usual moves made in various forms of criticism, and here it would take some form of reference to the puppet and wizened dwarf of the first thesis on the philosophy of history in order to characterise the relationship between historical materialism and history.

This means that Benjamin's use of theology is distinctly Christian and that his interest in Jewish thought comes out of this context.[16]

Gershom Scholem mounted a well-known argument for the inherent Jewishness of Benjamin's thought.[17] Many have sought to back up Scholem's arguments,[18] most notably Susan Buck-Morss, who draws on Scholem's work on Jewish mysticism to argue from the slightest hints that Benjamin's philosophical method and theory of history depend on Kabbalism.[19] Yet, Scholem and Buck-Morss overdo the Jewishness of Benjamin's thought. For, as John McCole has convincingly argued, it is based on an anachronism.[20] Scholem was himself almost single-handedly responsible for the recovery of Jewish mysticism and the study of the Kabbalah in the twentieth century, but he did this only after his move to Palestine in 1923. Not only was Benjamin extremely cagey about his references to Jewish mysticism, having available only limited nineteenth-century sources, but McCole also suggests it may well have been Benjamin who set Scholem on the path to the recovery of Jewish mysticism. Indeed, Benjamin's interest in these matters suggests a thinker more comfortable with Christian theology, but wanting to recover Jewish modes of exegesis in order to breathe new life into thinking itself.

But let me return to the first problem, the merging of theology and the Bible that we already noticed with Bloch. This relates more directly to my argument: while Benjamin identifies a major problem within Marxism – how to envisage change out of capitalism – his attempted solution is fraught with difficulties. Benjamin sought to use biblical categories as a philosophical method without the institutional basis, nor the truth claims of these categories. If, in the *Trauerspiel* book, he used them to deal with some of the major

---

[16] It is not that I wish to appropriate a Jewish thinker under Christendom, much like the Hebrew Bible into Christianity; rather, it seems to me that Benjamin is an uneasy Jewish thinker. In fact, my later argument concerning the return of mythology via Benjamin's theological biblical criticism does not depend on his use of Christian theology: he may well have arrived at the same point via Kabbalism.

[17] Scholem 1981, pp. 10–11, 14–15, 28–30. See also Scholem 1983.

[18] So, for instance, Rabinbach 1985; Ullmann 1992; Pizer 1995; Wohlfarth 1981.

[19] See Buck-Morss 1989, pp. 229–40. Her argument is guilty of some howlers: redemption is, for Christianity, private and spiritual, whereas, in Judaism, it is public and historical (this from Scholem); that Marxism's universal coherence was more attractive than the sectarian differences in Christianity or Judiasm. See, by contrast, Wohlfarth 1997. Compare this to his earlier essay Wohlfarth 1981.

[20] McCole 1993, pp. 65–66. See also Jennings 1987, pp. 94–6.

philosophical and literary problems, with his turn to Marxism, these biblical categories are now brought to bear on problems within Marxist thought and expectation. Thus, in the *Passagenarbeit*, this 'inveterate adversary of myth'[21] seeks to break out of the myth and dream-work of capitalism by means of the dialectical image, the caesura of the explosion out of history, waking from a dream. Yet, this break out from myth can only be mythical in Benjamin's formulation, and the problem begins with his elision of Bible and theology. His appropriations of the Bible are nearly always theological, drawing out schemata of history, modes of interpretation, theories of language; that is, he assumes that biblical interpretation is inevitably theological. In doing so, he neglects the fact that biblical studies and theology have been uneasy partners, and that biblical studies has long distanced itself from theology. And for good reason, for theology replicates and enhances biblical myths (those of the Fall, Christ and so on). The paradox, for Benjamin, is that, in his effort to appropriate biblical themes for a materialist 'redemption' from myth, he does so theologically, and that theology ensures that his solution to myth is unavoidably mythical. The major signal of such a mythical reading is Benjamin's well-known tendency to revert to sexual language. Where Bible and myth appear in Benjamin's texts, we find the language of sexuality, the gendered text, women as mythical other and the incessant repetition of birthing metaphors. But this is also characteristic of biblical myth, for the texts on which he draws, especially those of Genesis and the Eschaton, rely upon precisely such language. And so, although Benjamin attempts to find a language that will provide a shard of a very different future, his option for a theological reading of the Bible to provide this language is too problematic.

I work closely with two texts, one at the beginning and the other at the end of Benjamin's writing life: *The Origin of the German Mourning Play* (*Trauerspiel* book) and *The Arcades Project* (*Passagenarbeit*). Although traversed endlessly by Benjamin critics, my argument does not follow their well-worn paths. Rather, I work thematically, beginning with commentary and method, moving to allegory and then the relation between history and myth. With all the shifts that took place in Benjamin's work, a profound continuity between the two works emerges in my discussion. Thus, in the *Passagenarbeit,* he refers back to the *Trauerspiel* book when discussing crucial issues such as that of

[21] Wohlfarth 1997, p. 167.

Baudelaire's allegory or the theory of history. And then there are the methodological comments as well, particularly in the most philosophically reflective Konvolut N: 'The book on the Baroque exposed the seventeenth century to the light of the present day. Here, something analogous must be done for the nineteenth century, but with greater distinctness'.[22]

Trauerspiel

So let us dive into the *Trauerspiel* book, where I want to argue that Benjamin develps a distinct theory of allegory that he will subsequently appropriate as his own in the *Passagenarbeit*. Beneath the swirling eddies of that book on the German mourning play, I detect the deep currents of medieval biblical allegory, especially in the celebrated and influential final chapter of the book.[23]

I begin at the chapter's third and final section,[24] for here, after dealing with the need to recover the value of allegory over against the symbol,[25] as well as the various allegorical dimensions of the *Trauerspiel* itself, Benjamin moves to the heart of the nature of allegory – theology. 'For a critical understanding of the *Trauerspiel*, in its extreme, allegorical form, is possible only from the higher domain of theology; so long as the approach is an aesthetic one, paradox must have the last word'.[26] Not theology as such, but specifically the theology of history: 'Such a resolution, like the resolution of anything profane into the sacred, can only be accomplished historically, in terms of a theology of history, and only dynamically, not statically in the sense of a guaranteed

---

[22] Benjamin 1999a, p. 459; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 573.

[23] Although very different, my argument here was triggered by Fredric Jameson's reading of Benjamin's work in light of the four levels (see Jameson 1971, pp. 60–83). Jameson's curious inversion of the second and third levels – he transposes the second (allegorical) and third (moral) levels – is important for the development of his own theory of three levels of interpretation in Jameson 1981. See further Boer 1996.

[24] Benjamin 1998, pp. 215–35; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, pp. 390–409.

[25] In his earlier critique of the valorisation of the symbol over allegory (Benjamin 1998, pp. 159–167; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, pp. 336–44), he also criticises the infatuation with the classicistic symbol over against the genuine – theological – one, which 'could never have shed that sentimental twilight over the philosophy of beauty which has become more and more impenetrable since the end of early romanticism' (Benjamin 1998, p. 160; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 336). Baroque allegory also attacks the incorruptible classicism of German thought (Benjamin 1998, p. 175; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 351).

[26] Benjamin 1998, p. 216; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 390.

economics of salvation'.[27] I will keep a close watch both on Benjamin's notion of the theology of history [*Geschichtstheologie*] and on the economics of salvation [*Heilsökonomik*], for they will emerge as crucial features of his discussion.

If Benjamin then seems to slide away for a few pages from the promise of the first few lines,[28] ruminating on the function of the corpse in baroque drama, then we miss the deep theological current of an argument that only with death, as corpses, can the characters of the *Trauerspiel* 'enter into the homeland of allegory'.[29] This is heavily Christological, for behind it lies the death and resurrection of Christ and the simultaneous absence (the empty tomb) and presence (in the Eucharist) of the body of Christ. The reference is by no means arbitrary, for the figure of Christ was the allegorical key in medieval biblical exegesis, the moment in the second or allegorical level in which interpretation began.

So it is that he looks back from the baroque fascination with the allegorical corpse:

> It is not antiquarian interest which enjoins us to follow the tracks which lead from here, more clearly than from anywhere else, back into the Middle Ages. For it is not possible to overestimate the importance for the Baroque of the knowledge of the Christian origin of the allegorical outlook.[30]

Yet the possibility of baroque allegory arises from a conjunction of Christian and pagan traditions: the distinctly Christian forms of medieval allegory met various elements from Egyptian and Greek antiquity.[31] Benjamin's immediate aim is to show how the baroque dramatists who wrote the *Trauerspiele* were well aware of this heritage, but his way of dealing with this relationship is what interests me. Instead of working directly with medieval biblical exegesis, he assumes them as an indispensable background: 'But it will be unmistakably apparent, especially to anyone who is familiar with allegorical textual exegesis…'.[32] Benjamin seeks for the nature of baroque allegory around and

---

[27] Ibid.
[28] Benjamin 1998, pp. 216–220; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, pp. 390–3.
[29] Benjamin 1998, p. 217; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 391.
[30] Benjamin 1998, p. 220; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, pp. 393–4.
[31] See Benjamin 1998, pp. 171–2; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, pp. 347–8.
[32] Benjamin 1998, p. 175; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, pp. 350–1.

beneath this tradition. In the process, medieval allegorical exegesis becomes the absent centre of his writing on allegory.

Allegory has a tradition in biblical criticism that runs back to the earliest interpretation of the Bible, used by Origen for instance, who himself adapted a strategy used by the rationalist Hellenists, who found the myths of ancient Greece a little too crude for comfort and so interpreted them allegorically – as emotions, faculties of human activity, forces of nature, and so on. For Benjamin, this Greek heritage is pre-allegorical, since only with Christianity does allegory emerge fully. Yet, the irony of allegory is that, although it formed the basis of biblical interpretation for something like a millennium and a half, it is still in some disrepute in biblical studies, having to carry on a half-life in its various offshoots such as literary theory and cultural studies. The problem for biblical studies is that allegory is part of that whole world of interpretation dispensed with in the rise of 'modern' methods of interpretation that stressed the scientific and rational dimensions of the history of the Bible's emergence and of its literature.

Yet, allegory is a method of reading literature that has the Bible as its centre. The four levels of medieval exegesis, constructed over long years in order to contain the greater flights of fancy, have an extraordinary appeal about them. The names of the four levels – literal, allegorical, moral and anagogic – conjure up the richness of a vast history of interpretation. The allegorical level takes a first step by using the figure of Christ to render the meaning of the Hebrew Bible in Christian terms. Once this move is made, in which the Hebrew Bible refers to Christ himself, one can move to the life of the believer, the moral level, in which stories of the Hebrew Bible as well as the life and death of Christ refer directly to the individual life of faith. Finally, the anagogic level returns to the collective, although now in terms of the history of the people of God from creation to the end of the world. It seems to me that this extraordinary schema is the quiet partner to Benjamin's discussion, all the way through to his theory of history, one that relies on the final, anagogic, level of interpretation.

Demons, allegory and flesh (allegorical level)

Benjamin sets out on nothing less than a complete retelling of the history and development of allegory. And, in the process, he produces a finely tuned

theory of the way allegory itself works – a theory that continues to reverberate in literary criticism, although hardly at all in biblical studies. It seems to me that such attention to the workings of allegory is nothing less than an attempt to unravel the second, crucial level of allegorical interpretation itself.

As for the history of allegory, Benjamin makes the striking point that it was a Christian and not a Hellenistic invention. The Hellenistic effort to deal with the gods of Homer and others is merely an 'intensive preparation'.[33] In other words, Benjamin does not argue that allegory enabled the vaporisation of the gods, their reinterpretation as human emotions and so on, as happened in the Hellenistic era. Allegory arose only in the context of Christian opposition to the ancient gods. The problem for allegory was how to deal with these pagan 'gods': they were transposed from heaven to hell, becoming demons instead of gods. There is double dialectic here: to begin with, in the very act of banishing them, Christianity preserved the ancient gods, albeit in a faded and abstract form. Over against seeing allegory as a way of reading the gods out of existence, he argues that it was a means of preserving them in a hostile environment. But then, in dialectical obverse, allegory also arose precisely because it was not possible to banish them so easily. Their residual power had to be dealt with in some manner.

In other words, allegory names a paradox, for, in the effort at preserving what is passing, one seeks eternity: 'For an appreciation of the transcience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses in allegory'.[34] Here, we pass into Benjamin's broader theory of allegory, a method that works to preserve that which is passing away. Allegory is predicated on this desire, and, for the Middle Ages, it was the disappearance of classical antiquity that indicated the impermanence of all worlds and eras, locked into 'stations of its decline'.[35] Or, as he puts it in the sentence made famous by Adorno: 'in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape'.[36]

---

[33] Benjamin 1998, p. 223; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 397.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Benjamin 1998, p. 166; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 343.
[36] Ibid.

For a transient world that is running down in a spiral of decay and decline, ruins and fragments – the echo of the biblical 'remnant' should not be missed here[37] – becomes a feature of allegory:

> In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.[38]

In order to deal with such a world, the very language of the baroque writers becomes allegorical, fragmented and broken – 'anagrams, the onomatopoeic phrases, and many other examples of linguistic virtuosity, word, syllable, and sound'[39] – so that, at the moment such language loses its connection to traditional meaning, it becomes allegorical.[40] And, here, the crucial second stage of medieval biblical allegory comes to the fore: the function of this second, properly allegorical stage was to unlock the restrictions of the literal meaning. Breaks and hitches, fragments of word and sentence, were the stuff of this second stage of interpretation. And, just like the medieval allegorists, the baroque artists were interested in the fragment or anomaly that provides the allegorical trigger.

Fall and Eschaton (moral and anagogic levels)

Whereas the initial phases of Benjamin's discussion concerns the allegorical stage proper, the later parts of the chapter on allegory focus on the moral and anagogic levels. The fourth and final level, the anagogic, begins with the Fall and closes with the Eschaton, and, within these parameters, comes history itself. At the third, by contrast, we have the individual life of the

---

[37] So Cowan 1981, p. 117.

[38] Benjamin 1998, pp. 177–8; see also p. 188; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, pp. 353–4 and 364.

[39] Benjamin 1998, p. 207; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 381.

[40] Too often, however, elements such as transience, fragments, ruins and melancholy are carefully extracted from their theological context, which is then left by the wayside of Benjamin criticism. Susan Buck-Morss is a welcome exception: 'Benjamin's stated purpose in the *Trauerspiel* study is not so much to evaluate this Christian resolution as to demonstrate that in Baroque allegory, such theological thinking is primary'. Buck-Morss 1989, p. 174.

believer, for whom Fall and Eschaton become the daily battles with sin and the promise of personal salvation.

How, then, does the Fall appear? Through guilt – a guilt that attaches in allegory to both interpreter and object interpreted, that is, to human beings and nature which both suffer from the Fall. Here, allegory's profoundly Christian nature appears, for allegory is both a postlapsarian condition of language and the only possible means of salvation for guilt-laden nature – precisely because it sifts through the ruins in order to locate a moment of eternity. But there is a catch: the possibility of reading Genesis 2–3 as the 'Fall', as a narrative of sin and guilt, can happen only via an allegory in which Christ becomes the key. In other words, the moral (individual) and anagogic (collective) narrative of Fall and redemption is possible only with the allegorical moment of the New Testament. The second level enables the third and fourth to make their way forward.

Benjamin's treatment of the Fall will become central to my later discussion, especially for what I want to call Benjamin's anagogic theory of history. So let me explore for a moment the theological logic that lies behind Benjamin's fascination with the Fall. The Fall is ultimately oriented to the future rather than the past: built into the specifically Christian notion of the Fall is a pattern of redemption. Hardly a matter of free choice, the Fall is necessary for salvation – without the sin of Adam and Eve, Christ would not have appeared. Thus the Fall enables history itself to begin, specifically the history of salvation, *Heilsgeschichte*.

Personalised, this narrative becomes the contest between Satan and Christ. In the single theological figure of Satan all the pagan powers were concentrated, and so he becomes the ultimate allegorical figure. Tyrants, tricksters, intriguers, rogues of all sorts – whether in the *Trauerspiele* or Shakespeare – become allegories for Satan.[41] Of course, Satan himself is another result of reading the Hebrew Bible allegorically in light of the New Testament. Thus the serpent in Eden becomes Satan, but he also is directly responsible for a Fall for which we need none other than Christ. In the moment of Satanic dominance does redemption appear, and the model for this is the death of Christ:

[41] Benjamin 1998, p. 227; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 401.

> The bleak confusion of Golgotha, which can be recognized as the schema underlying the allegorical figures in hundreds of engravings and descriptions of the period, is not just a symbol of the desolation of human existence. In it transitoriness is not signified or allegorically represented, so much as, in its own significance, displayed as allegory. As the allegory of resurrection.[42]

That Christ should appear eventually is hardly a surprise, given his centrality to medieval allegory. And this is the catch, for, if Christ is the key to allegory, then he is also the key to its redemption: allegory undergoes a reflexive redemption, internally transformed despite itself. In other words, allegory seeks a restoration of meaning, a 'parable of redeemed life'. For 'the intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection'.[43] But why faithless? In turning in on itself, allegory empties itself of content. Christ becomes a cipher for allegory, but, as he fades away in the non-existent realm of allegory, evil and vice dissipate to become the subjective knowledge of evil, i.e. guilt, which is the origin of allegory. The only redemption is of allegory itself.[44] It seems to me that Benjamin's move here is extraordinarily volatile: he attempts to develop a method based on theological commentary or allegory that does away with the theological content. By arguing in a swift double-take that the only concern of allegory is allegory itself, he neatly sidesteps the truth claims of theology. Is Benjamin able to contain such a move? Adorno was not so sure, although he was fascinated by Benjamin's effort. While Adorno remained suspicious of any effort to base a position on theological categories, he also wanted to take theology to its dialectical conclusion – beyond theology. But let us see how the method Benjamin explores in the *Trauerspiel* book becomes his own in the last great work of his life.

---

[42] Benjamin 1998, p. 232; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 406.

[43] Benjamin 1998, p. 233; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 406. 'In a like manner [to Kierkegaard's critique of dialectics], Benjamin charged that the operation of allegory triggered meaning in the emblem, through a dialectical trick (*Kunstgriff*), as through a spring. At the deepest point of its fall or immersion (*Versenlung*) into nothingness, allegory in fact turned into a redemptive figure of itself'. (Hanssen 1998, p. 100.)

[44] See further Adorno 1984; Hanssen 1998, p. 102; Buck-Morss 1989, pp. 174–5.

Passagenarbeit

As I pass on to the *Passagenarbeit*, let me summarise my argument. Benjamin's underlying assumption is that capitalism, represented in its most advanced and decayed form in the Paris of the nineteenth century, marks a reversion to myth, an archaicising that is constitutive of modernity.[45] In suggesting that capitalism was caught in the dreamworld of myth, Benjamin sought to extend Marx's analysis of capitalism, particularly his famous notion of the fetishism of commodities. In order to break out of such myth, Benjamin develops a number of categories such as waking from the dream, a violent blasting out of history and the dialectical image. Allegory becomes the method of doing so, now very much part of the method rather than an object of study. As Susan Buck-Morss argues, Benjamin tried to avoid

> not only the 'betrayal of nature' involved in the spiritual transcendence of the Baroque Christian allegorists, but also that political resignation of Baudelaire and his contemporaries which ultimately ontologizes the emptiness of the historical experience of the commodity, the new as always-the-same.[46]

However, as I have argued, allegory is a method that Benjamin develops out of biblical commentary, particularly as a theological form of commentary. Although he identifies and astutely develops the key problem of the future within Marxism, his way of dealing with it has profound implications for his suggested solution.

Method: collector as allegorist

First, however, I want to argue for the deeply theological nature of his treatment of the arcades. The personification of methods appears with 'The Collector' in Konvolut H,[47] whom I will prefer to the much more popular – at least among critics – ragpicking *flâneur* of Konvolut M. Of course, 'The Collector' personifies Benjamin's own task: 'Here, the Paris arcades are examined as though they were properties in the hand of a collector'.[48] The

---

[45] As a general introduction to the *Arcades Project*, nothing surpasses that by Rolf Tiedemann in the *Collected Works*: Tiedemann 1991.

[46] Buck-Morss 1989, p. 201.

[47] On the collector, see Steinberg 1996, also the first sketch of 1927–30; Benjamin 1999a, pp. 857–8; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 1027–8.

[48] Benjamin 1999a, p. 205; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 272.

collection becomes a purposive historical system into which the irrational and haphazard items are integrated: 'for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch, the landscape, the industry, the owner from which it comes'.[49]

Above all, the collector is an allegorist with a theological twist.[50] Despite the differences with the baroque allegorist – the collector seeks to bring things together in order to locate their affinities, whereas the allegorist has given up on this, preferring to interpret the dispersal itself – both allegorist and collector struggle against the confusion and scatter of things. If the collector's compilation is never complete, the allegorist can never have enough of things.[51] But the collector is also theological: he has an 'unequalled view of the object' that takes in more 'than that of the profane owner'.[52] Likened to a physiognomist and dictionary, the ordering of the world through the collector's objects has 'a surprising and, for the profane understanding, incomprehensible connection'.[53]

One last item knits the *Trauerspiel* book and the *Passagenarbeit* into the same methodological fabric: allegory now draws upon the leitmotif from Marx's *Capital* on the fetishism of commodities. Here, the commodity becomes the allegorical form *par excellence*, an even more fragmented item than those gathered by the baroque allegorists. For the collector 'detaches the object from its functional relations' and elevates 'the commodity to the status of allegory'.[54] In this breathtaking move, Benjamin seeks to integrate Marxism with his earlier work on allegory – it is not for nothing that the close of Konvolut H on 'The Collector' is peppered with quotations from Marx, who turns out to be something of a collector himself:

> Marx, in the afterword to the second edition of *Das Kapital*: 'Research has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its various forms of development, to trace out their inner connection. Only after this work is done can the actual movement be presented in corresponding fashion. If

---

[49] Benjamin 1999a, p. 205; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 271.
[50] Benjamin 1999a, p. 206; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 273.
[51] Benjamin 1999a, p. 211; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 279–80.
[52] Benjamin 1999a, p. 207; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 274; see also p. 857; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 1027.
[53] Benjamin 1999a, p. 207; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 274.
[54] Benjamin 1999a, p. 207; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 27.

> this is done successfully, if the life of the material is reflected back as ideal, then it may appear as if we had before us an a priori construction'. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. 1, ed. Korsch (Berlin <1932>), p. 45.[55]

Passages

As far as the work as a whole is concerned, the 'passages' provide not merely a map of Paris – streets, arcades, metro, catacombs, sewers (C and L), barricades in the new Haussmann boulevardes (E), architecture (F), railways (F), the bourgeois interior (I), the running together of domestic interior, or dream house, and arcades (L), the streets of the *flâneur* that become one with the residences (M), the streets themselves (P), their modes of lighting (T) and so on – but the spatial arrangement of Paris itself is also an allegory, a way of reading the city. Thus, after the first Konvolut in which the extraordinary dimensions of the arcades begin to take shape, the second moves on to fashion, an element of capitalism that itself arose at the time of the arcades, where women were first enabled to go out, to promenade, escorted of course, to see and be seen in the latest fashion. By the third Konvolut, this allegory moves to the catacombs and underground passages of ancient Paris, and, here, allegory takes flight, with perpetual references to myth and the gods. But the complexity builds, for even the underground has its own temporal and spatial intersections, the newer Metro crossing lines with ancient vaults, limestone quarries, grottoes and catacombs.[56] Paris itself becomes a model for allegory, a method within itself. For the topography, 'its arcades and its gateways, its cemetaries and bordellos, its railroad stations and its…', speaks of 'more secret, more deeply embedded figures of the city: murders and rebellions, the bloody knots in the network of the streets, lairs of love, and conflagrations'.[57] And then Benjamin returns, time and again but from different angles, to the various layers of an allegorical Paris and the modes by which it began to multiply and represent itself in new technologies and practices: the arcades, railways and architecture in light of iron construction (F), railways themselves (U), exhibitions and world expos (G), dream houses

---

[55] Benjamin 1999a, p. 465; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 581.
[56] Benjamin 1999a, p. 85; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 137.
[57] Benjamin 1999a, p. 83; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 134–5.

and interiors (L), prostitution and gambling (O), panoramas (Q), mirrors (R), painting (S), photography (Y) and lithography (i).

It is not so much the banal point that Paris is a 'text', nor even that the city may be interpreted according to a particular method. For Benjamin, it seems, the city, explored in its various levels begins to read itself. Not only does the physical and spatial arrangement of the city function allegorically, but it also provides a reverse key for the less than tangible elements in the *Passagenarbeit*.

Most symptomatically, allegory's function shifts from the *Trauerspiel* book to the *Passagenarbeit*. Not only does allegory enter the fabric of the latter work, where allegory becomes a practice rather than a topic, but it also gains a double register that seeks to connect historical materialism and theology. As for Marxism, Benjamin dispenses with the vague references to 'bourgeois' culture or language that characterised his earlier work in favour of more specific connections to political economy. Time and again there is an identifiable economic register that relates culture directly to political economy.

The most obvious presence of political economy is in the whole Konvoluten devoted to such topics as the 'Haussmannisation' of Paris – the clearing of large tracts of the city by Baron von Haussmann under Napoleon III and the construction of massive boulevards. Again, Benjamin's interest is in the passages of Paris, but here he focuses not only on the economic dimensions of the process – land speculation, government debt and so on – but also on the political. For the new wide boulevards were supposed to negate the possibility of constructing barricades by insurrectionists; of course, they provided the means for the largest of barricades, some up to two stories high. By Konvolut X, on Marx, we find a range of Marxist concepts, such as the labour theory of value (use-value, exchange-value, surplus-value), the division of labour, and endless quotations on the fetishism of commodities. The hard materialism in these sections is the most strikingly new element in the *Passagenarbeit*, for Benjamin was attempting a revision of crude Marxist determinism: 'It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture'.[58]

[58] Benjamin 1999a, p. 460; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 573–4.

The double allegory of Marxism and theology

Alongside allegory, the *Passagenarbeit* does not dispense with specific theological references. However, Benjamin seeks not to explain religious ideas in terms of Marxist categories; by contrast, the items that interest him – unexpected and peripheral though they might be – are read in two directions, or what I want to call a double allegory. Rather than adding Marxism to the allegorical mix, Benjamin's method undergoes a fundamental shift. The allegorical moment of interpretation enables him to read the various cultural products in terms of political economics *and/or* theology.

Although the impetus came from Benjamin's own explicit adoption of Marxism without giving up his earlier theological concerns, he found in Marx – especially the first part of *Capital* that was minimal reading for Marxist literary critics – the justification for such a dual register. Symptomatic is the repetition of an oft-quoted sentence from Marx where Benjamin finds the inseparability of theology and Marxism: 'A commodity appears, at first sight, to be a trivial and easily understood thing. Our analysis shows that, in reality, it is a vexed and complicated thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'.[59] Taking on a life of its own in the market, it becomes a 'material immaterial [*sinnlich übersinnlich*]' thing, an idol full of the breath of life.

The ultimate model for Benjamin's allegorical connections between theology and economics comes in the endless Konvolut on Baudelaire (J), although an earlier note signals his interest: 'Baudelaire on allegory (very important!), *Paradis artificiels*, p. 73'.[60] What seems to intrigue Benjamin about Baudelaire is that he not only provides a master key of nineteenth-century Paris, but also how his poetry is riddled with both theological and biblical themes. Unable to believe in an 'exterior visible being' that is concerned with his fate,[61] Benjamin notes that Baudelaire's poetry speaks endlessly of Christ, Jehovah, Mary, Mary Magdalene, the angels, and, somewhat later, Satan. All of this forms

[59] Benjamin 1999a, p. 181; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 245. A slightly different translation appears at Benjamin 1999a, pp. 196–7; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 260: 'A commodity appears, at first sight, to be a trivial thing and easily understood. Our analysis shows that in reality it is a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'. The first quotation in my text comes from Rühle 1943 [1928], whereas the second is drawn from Mehring 1928.

[60] Benjamin 1999a, p. 841; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 1009.

[61] Benjamin 1999a, p. 312; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 394.

part of the allegorical maze of his work, in which Baudelaire rivals Adam in naming all that was not named – hopes, fears, regrets, curiosities and so on. These function in an allegorical register, as 'souvenirs' of human beings – of remorse, repentance, virtue, hope and anguish (theological categories) – that can become allegorical only in their passing, much like the medieval souvenirs of the gods.

The most sustained effort to read Baudelaire as an allegorist comes in a stretch of the *Passagenarbeit* where Benjamin invokes many of the categories from the *Trauerspiel* book such as melancholy, brooding, fragments, corpse, Golgotha and so on. As the 'armature of his poetry',[62] Baudelaire was fascinated by the beginnings of allegory in late Latin poetry, where the names of gods appear as allegorical marks of something else. But then Benjamin quotes his own text in the *Trauerspiel* – the first of a number of occasions – to make the point that the appearance of allegory in the high Middle Ages was the result of the confluence of Antiquity and Christianity, of the nature of the gods and guilt-laden *physis*. But rather than appearing late, for Baudelaire, the 'allegorical experience was primary for him; one can say that he appropriated from the antique world, as from the Christian, no more than he needed to set going in his poetry that primordial experience'.[63] Melancholic, arguing that smiling or laughing were fundamentally Satanic, embodying a violence that could destroy the false harmony of the world, homeless, estranged and alienated from everything that might have been familiar, Baudelaire's allegory is for Benjamin based on the fragmentation and ruins that he first considered in the *Trauerspiel* book.

Yet, in all his discussion of Baudelaire, Marx is never far away.[64] Benjamin uses Baudelaire to strengthen his insight into the connection between allegory and commodities, since the commodification of experience that comes with capitalism finds its proper mode in allegory.[65] More specifically, Benjamin argues that price is the crucial marker of allegory: invoking yet again the 'metaphysical niceties' of which he was fond, he argues that the unforeseen

---

[62] Benjamin 1999a, p. 324; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 408.

[63] Benjamin 1999a, pp. 324–5; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 409, see also pp. 366–7; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 463–4.

[64] See also the heavy dose of quotations from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* in Benjamin 1999a, pp. 357–9, 368; and Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 451–5, 465.

[65] See Benjamin 1999a, pp. 328, 346; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 413, 436.

and unpredictable nature of price is 'exactly the same with the object in its allegorical existence'.[66] Here, the vagaries and fluctuations of allegorical meaning become one with the vagaries and fluctuations of commodity prices.

What interests me here is the sheer elision of commodity, price tag and allegorical meaning. This brings all the criticism of Adorno to bear – that Benjamin's method cries out for at least some mediation rather that mere juxtaposition. As others have pointed out, Adorno was not quite fair to Benjamin, whose throwing together of items – the embodiment of the allegorist as collector – sought to generate meaning from such a process. But Adorno's criticism works very well at another level: Benjamin does place allegory, a fundamentally theological mode of biblical commentary, cheek by jowl with the Marxist critique of commodities and price. Does this transform allegory into a great modernist enterprise, as Benjamin himself now suggests, finding its fulfilment in capitalism?

Let me consider a little more closely the theological moves, which become overt in Konvoluten C and N, one an example, the other theoretical. The theory first: with a few passing brushes, Benjamin suggests that theology is as much part of the *Passagenarbeit* as the *Trauerspielbuch*, although now it is a little more enigmatic: 'My thinking is related to theology as blotting pad is related to ink. It is saturated with it. Were one to go by the blotter, however, nothing of what is written would remain.'[67]

Saturation and diffusion mark the relation: Benjamin's thinking takes up theology only to see it spread and blend, so that what is written is no longer legible as theology. Is this a refusal of the truth content of theology that I considered earlier? There is no explicit suggestion of such. Rather, theology can operate only indirectly:

> …history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance. What science has 'determined' (*festgestelt*), remembrance (*Eingedenken*) can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and complete (suffering) into something complete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids

[66] Benjamin 1999a, p. 369; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 466.
[67] Benjamin 1999a, p. 471; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 588.

> us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted to us to write it with immediately theological concepts.[68]

According to this passage, theology has a profoundly melancholic note about it: as remembrance not only may it bring happiness to an end but it can also reopen a past suffering. But this remembrance, if we work backwards through the quoted text, is also history, a 'form of remembrance'. As remembrance, history is then inescapably theological, and yet such a theological history must be written indirectly. Neither atheological nor immediately theological, that is the dilemma Benjamin attempts to face in the *Passagenarbeit*. His use of theology, *as a method*, has then become indirect, mediated (through Marxism). But is it not also the case that the appropriation of theology as a method means that the possibility of the concepts themselves having some viable space becomes highly problematic?

My emphasis on theology as a method is not without reason, for Benjamin offers a snippet in this direction:

> Bear in mind that commentary on a reality (for it is a question here of commentary, of interpretation in detail) calls for a method completely different from that required by commentary on a text. In the case of one, the scientific mainstay is theology; in the other case, philology.[69]

I cannot help but read the last opposition – theology and philology – as the trace of an older opposition between theology and biblical studies. For is not philology, the working with texts, a method that arises from biblical criticism, or more specifically textual criticism – the close attention to manuscripts and versions in order to interpret the text? But Benjamin seems to prefer theology, or commentary on reality over against philology. In fact, 'commentary on a text' (biblical studies/philology) has not so much been sent into exile as subsumed within 'commentary on reality' (theology). The catch, of course, is that Benjamin's primary mode of analysing the 'reality' of nineteenth-century Paris is by working with texts: in other words, he uses philology, textual commentary, in order to generate a theological commentary on reality. This is about as explicit as Benjamin gets: theology thoroughly subsumes textual,

---

[68] Benjamin 1999a, p. 471; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 589.

[69] Benjamin 1999a, p. 460; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 574; see also Benjamin 1999a, p. 858; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 1028.

and thereby biblical, commentary. This is simultaneously an awareness of the tensions between theology and biblical studies and yet an abdication of pursuing the difference further. He falls back on the dominance of theology, a move that generates major problems with his analysis in the *Passagenarbeit*.

But what of the example I mentioned earlier, in Konvolut C? Here, as we descend to a subterranean Paris, the theological references teem. Like Pausanias, who produced a topography of Greece in AD 200, 'at a time when the cult sites and many other monuments had begun to fall into ruin',[70] Benjamin's own topography traces the ruins of Paris's own cultic origins and past.[71] Whether it is the 'muses' of the surrealists,[72] the mythical topographies of Balzac or Hugo,[73] gates as both border markers and triumphal arches,[74] thresholds, whether penates, or household gods, at the entrances to arcade, skating rink, pub or tennis court,[75] or the various entries into the 'underworld' of the Metro, each has its mythical referents. In the case of the latter, the underground names become sewer gods, catacomb fairies, the passages a labyrinth with 'a dozen blind raging bulls' and the signs themselves mark not the 'linguistic network of the city' but hell itself.[76] So much so that guides offer tours to see the Devil.[77]

Benjamin's theological commentary reads the myriad dimensions of Paris as an allegory of hell. Here, he sublates his earlier argument on baroque allegory – the pagan gods simultaneously survive and are demoted as demons[78] – in the Satanic hell of nineteenth-century capitalism. And who but the Satanic Baudelaire as the preferred guide for capitalism, for Baudelaire gives a 'radical-theological form to his radical rejection of those in power'?[79] But, if we look more closely at the subterranean Paris of Konvolut C, we see not the

---

[70] Benjamin 1999a, p. 82; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 133.
[71] See also Benjamin 1999a, p. 861; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 1031.
[72] Benjamin 1999a, p. 82; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 133.
[73] Benjamin 1999a, p. 83; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 134; also Benjamin 1999a, pp. 92–5; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 145–9.
[74] Benjamin 1999a, pp. 86–7; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 139.
[75] Benjamin 1999a, pp. 88–9; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 141–2.
[76] Benjamin 1999a, p. 84; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 136.
[77] Benjamin 1999a, p. 85; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 137.
[78] 'Parallelism between this work and the *Trauerspiel* book. Common to both, the theme: theology of hell. Allegory, advertisement, types: martyr, tyrant – whore, speculator'. Benjamin 1999a, p. 854; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 1022–3.
[79] Benjamin 1973, p. 24.

traditional panoply of theological themes but also the pagan myths of Greece and Rome. Just like demons of baroque allegory, these pagan myths survive by descending to the underworld. The dialectical catch now, however, is that these myths are not merely survivals: they have in fact been generated anew by a profound archaicising that lay at the heart of modern capitalism.

Hell and myth draw closer together in Benjamin's discussion. He revisits a hell replete with ancient Greek characters (Tantalus, Sisyphus and the Danaides), Satan and the prime metaphors of capitalism who give themselves over to fate, the prostitute and the gambler. The mythical dimensions of nineteenth-century capitalism render it pure hell, a critique that also had the myths of blood, soil and the Blond Beast of fascism in mind.[80] At this point, a whole series of other materials come into play, such as the sheer hell of the eternal return in Nietzsche,[81] the hell of novelty, the systematic process of dream-like forgetting of the historical origins of the bourgeoisie, the idea of nineteenth-century Paris as a nightmarish dream, the new aesthetic response of boredom, and the belief in progress, the 'infinite perfectibility understood as an infinite ethical task', as another form of the myth of eternal return.

Myth and history

I have already passed into myth, since it forms a central element in Benjamin's analysis of *fin-de-siècle* capitalism: 'What would the nineteenth century', he writes in one of the first sketches, 'be to us if we were bound to it by tradition? How would it look as religion or mythology?'[82] As a hell of the eternal return of the same, a Satanic realm that comes out so clearly in Baudelaire's allegory, in the very architecture of the arcades,[83] as the world of the fetishised commodity that Benjamin saw expressed no better than in Grandville's work, Benjamin sought both to deepen Marx's analysis of capitalism and provide a way of conceptualising the break from capitalism to communism. In this respect, the emergence from myth becomes a historical problem, and it is

[80] See Janz 1983, pp. 363–81 especially p. 64.
[81] Benjamin 1999a, pp. 118–19; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 177–8.
[82] Benjamin 1999a, p. 831; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 998.
[83] 'Architecture as the most important testimony to latent "mythology." And the most important architecture of the nineteenth century is the arcade'. Benjamin 1999a, p. 834; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 1002.

the relation between myth and history that is my focus in this penultimate section. Despite his brilliant analysis of capitalism, I argue that Benjamin's attempted solution to the possibility of a different future out of capitalism fails, caught in the trap of another mythology.

To begin with, I explore the break Benjamin so desperately sought, after which I interrogate the background to such a solution in the theory of history he developed earlier, particularly its intense concern with Creation and Eschaton. That this history is as mythical as capitalism itself indicates a more general problem with imagining any future than with Benjamin's project as such.

In typical fashion, Benjamin's most sustained discussion of the break from the dream-like myth of capitalism emerges from a quoted double-take: he quotes Adorno quoting Kierkegaard and then himself from the *Trauerspiel* book:

> A Kierkegaard citation in Wiesengrund, with commentary following: '"One may arrive at a similar consideration of the mythical by beginning with the imagistic. When, in an age of reflection, one sees the imagistic protrude ever so slightly and unobserved in a reflective representation and, like an antediluvian fossil, suggest another species of existence which washed away doubt, one will perhaps be amazed that the image could ever have played such an important role." Kierkegaard wards off the "amazement" with what follows. Yet this amazement heralds the deepest insight into the interrelation of dialectic, myth, and image. For it is not as the continuously living and present that nature prevails in the dialectic. Dialectic comes to a stop in the image, and, in the context of recent history, it cites the mythical as what is long gone: nature as primal history. For this reason, the images – which, like those of the *intérieur*, bring dialectic and myth to the point of indifferentiation – are truly "antediluvian fossils." They may be called dialectical images, to use Benjamin's expression, whose compelling definition of "allegory" also holds true for Kierkegaard's allegorical intention taken as a figure of historical dialectic and mythical nature. According to this definition, "in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history, a petrified primordial landscape."'[84]

[84] Benjamin 1999a, p. 461; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 575–6; see Adorno 1989, p. 54; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 80; Benjamin 1998, p. 166; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 343.

Apart from the convoluted dialectic of the quotation itself – Adorno's Kierkegaard book was heavily dependent on Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book – Benjamin picks up the idea of the dialectical image, which Adorno himself developed from Benjamin! He is, of course, after the nature of the image, for in Kierkegaard the image brings, in the well-known phrase, the dialectic to a stop. But the real question here is whether Benjamin took notice of Adorno's criticism of theology – especially his argument that Kierkegaard's effort to base philosophy on theology was bound to fail in its reversion to myth. I suspect he did not, for Adorno's point is that Kierkegaard's aesthetic cannot help but be archaic and primal, that is, mythical. Even in the snippets quoted here, Adorno worries away at the question of myth, precisely on the basis of Benjamin's work: he draws from Benjamin's *Trauerspielbuch* the opposition between history and nature, which becomes in Adorno's hands the realm of a spatialised and timeless myth. And then the 'landscape' in the famous '*facies hippocratica*' quotation is, in fact, that of myth, petrified and primordial. But, in the curious interchange, Benjamin misses Adorno's point and plunges headlong into myth itself.[85] For Benjamin uses theology, or rather, a theological appropriation of biblical commentary, to break the hold of myth within capitalism. Yet, as Adorno never tires of pointing out, theology cannot avoid falling back on myth.

It is worth tarrying with the argument that follows the passage I quoted above. He takes it in two directions, one in terms of the dialectical image and the other, closely related, of the blasting out of history. As for the dialectical image, Benjamin shifts the double register of theology and political economy that I have been following through the *Passagenarbeit* to the more specific one of technology and myth. And the Konvoluten that follow play with this relationship: Saint-Simon (O), Fourier (W) and the history of sects (p) find themselves juxtaposed with panoramas (Q), technology (S), modes of lighting (T), railroads (U), photography (Y), dolls and automaton (Z), reproduction technology and lithography (i).

But what Benjamin wants to do with this is attempt to produce a new dialectic that will break the hold of myth – a dialectic of the image rather than argumentation, dialectics at a standstill, 'the quintessence of the method':[86] 'image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now

[85] See further Adorno 1977, pp. 111–12.
[86] Benjamin 1999a, p. 865; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 1035.

to form a constellation'.[87] Like the flash, or 'posthumous shock'[88] of a camera, such a dialectical image seeks to overcome a purely temporal relation between past and present. The image is therefore not historical progression, but 'suddenly emergent', a flash that is found, enigmatically, in language. Is this not a homeopathic solution? Benjamin takes the conjunction of the archaic and modern that capitalism generates in the interplay between technology and myth – the more technology develops the more myth returns – and pushes it to its logical extreme. The technology of capitalism exacerbates its own contradictions to the point of collapse.[89]

Appropriation of the maternal function

I have yet to explore the other line I noted above – the blast out of history. And rather than take the well-known text out of the theses 'On the Philosophy of History', I want to focus on the variations of this statement that appear in the *Passagenarbeit*. Concerned to develop his own revolutionary aesthetics and philosophy, Benjamin resorts to the terminology of armed conflict – blast, explode, ruin.[90] He does so in order to be rid of the homogenous in history. But the source of the blast is the monad, bursting forth to break open history and offer something new.

> If the object of history is to be blasted out of the continuum of historical succession, that is because its monadological structure demands it. This structure first comes to light in the extracted object itself. And it does so in the form of the historical confrontation that makes up the interior (and, as it

---

[87] Benjamin 1999a, p. 462; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 576.

[88] Benjamin 1973, p. 132; see also pp. 145–8.

[89] A comparable notion is, of course, that of waking from a dream – Benjamin's answer to the surrealists: 'Accordingly, we present the new, the dialectical method of doing history: with the intensity of a dream, to pass through what has been, in order to experience the present as the waking world to which the dream refers!'. Benjamin 1999a, p. 838; see also pp. 845, 854–5, 863, 883; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 1006, 1012, 1023, 1033, 1057–8. See also Leslie 2000, pp. 20–1; Buck-Morss 1989, pp. 253–86. Buck-Morss develops a fascinating Benjaminian reading of the end of the Cold War that relies heavily of Benjamin's more surrealistic side; see Cohen 1993; 1995. For Margaret Cohen, it is surrealism itself that provides the key, rather than one element among many, to Benjamin's fantastic and gothic Marxism. See also Pensky 1996, pp. 164–89, and McCole 1993, pp. 206–52.

[90] See also Benjamin 1999a, pp. 857, 862, 863; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 1026–7, 1032, 1033.

> were, the bowels) of the historical object, and into which all the forces and interests of history enter on a reduced scale. It is owing to this monadological structure that the historical object finds represented in its interior its own fore-history and after-history.[91]

Benjamin seems to have passed well beyond theology in his search for a new way of conceptualising the revolution out of capitalism, but what is noticeable about the text I have quoted and others like it is the highly sexualised and maternal language when he begins to speak of that break. All that is missing is the phrase 'pregnant with tensions', but that comes in the theses 'On the Philosophy of History'.

> Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history – blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of a lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time cancelled; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed.[92]

In both quotations, he conflates male insemination and female birth-giving. Thus, when the 'object of history' is blasted out both male ejaculation and female birth-giving are evoked; thoughts 'flow' and 'arrest', stopping suddenly in a moment 'pregant with tensions', a 'shock' that miraculously produces the 'monad'. Characteristic of such appropriations is the immediate production of an object, a child, without any recognition of the long process of gestation: the man ejaculates and lo, a child is born. While the second quotation turns around the blast and shock and its historical implications,

---

[91] Benjamin 1999a, p. 475; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 594.
[92] Benjamin 1992, p. 254; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 703.

the first is obsessed with what may as well be called the womb of history, the 'interior' and the 'bowels' of the historical object, 'into which all the forces and interests of history enter on a reduced scale'.

From here, the object of history is to be blasted out and extracted, the 'violent expulsion from the continuum of historical process'.[93] But there is a curious doubling over in which inseminator, mother of history and their progeny become one: the object of history is blasted out of its own womb. If this seems a little odd, then it is very much part of the way in which the maternal function is appropriated by those who cannot give birth: not only is there a conflation of insemination and birth, but the male body becomes a site of its own auto-generation: hence the final oral image of the 'precious but tasteless seed', for the only mode of auto-generation open to man is to come in his own mouth.

In the theses 'On the Philosophy of History' the appropriation of the maternal body to speak of history becomes even more overt, both in the revision of the quotation I have cited above and in the first thesis of the wizened dwarf of theology, the little hunchback who is an expert chess player and sits inside and guides the puppet.[94] Although the child appears old and in control it still sits within the womb of history. I must admit that I am less interested in the immediate content of Benjamin's famous images – the first thesis has been used time and again to characterise the relation between theology and historical materialism in his thought – than in the repetitive and overlaid patterns such images follow. And one of those patterns is that of conception, pregnancy, giving birth – in short, of the maternal body.

If we thought that this appropriation of the maternal body was a late development in Benjamin's eschatological thought, then we need only to look at 'The Task of the Translator'[95] from 1916 to see that this was a consistent element.[96] Here, Benjamin suggests that one path to the Eschaton – or, as he and his host of followers prefer, the messianic era – is that of translation. Over against the many different and partial languages that translation seems to throw up in sharp relief, the task of translation actually allows us to glimpse,

---

[93] Benjamin 1999a, p. 475; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 594.
[94] Benjamin 1992, p. 245; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 693.
[95] Benjamin 1996, pp. 253–63; Benjamin 1972, Volume 4, pp. 9–21.
[96] Even though the direction of my argument is quite different, I still find Paul de Man's reading ('"Conclusions"') the most engaging and intriguing, precisely because of its careful misreading.

however momentarily, pure language. Only now, instead of being a prelapsarian language, it is one that awaits fulfilment. Translation shows forth, if you will, 'language-in-the-making':[97]

> If, however, these languages continue to grow in this way until the messianic end of their history, it is translation that catches fire from the eternal life of the works and the perpetually renewed life of language; for it is translation that keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation? How close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness?[98]

This is where a sacred history underlies the translation essay: the 'hallowed growth of languages'[99] contained in profane translations would last until the messianic end. And how does this take place in translation? Only when translation makes 'both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel'.[100]

Tempting as it is to delve into the complexities of his thoughts on translation, and especially my favourite final line – 'The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation'[101] – I will resist that temptation here. Rather, what intrigues me is the way the language of birthing appears *precisely the same point, namely at the Eschaton*. But now the talk is of the relationship between the original text and its translation, the mechanism for glimpsing the Eschaton. And, not unexpectedly, a range of mythical, sexualised and birthing metaphors appear that attempt to circumvent the notion of an original and its copy: the afterlife of a text, the creation of a new language, the translatability or fertility of the original, the play between fidelity and license – all of which are indebted to mythical biblical motifs. If we harboured any doubts that Benjamin is buried in such language, then his reference to the 'problem of ripening the seed of pure language in a translation'[102] should dispel those doubts.

It seems to me that this metaphorical appropriation of the maternal function acts as a profound signal of theological commentary in Benjamin's writing,

---

[97] Benjamin 1996, p. 294; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 243.
[98] Benjamin 1996, p. 257; Benjamin 1972, Volume 4, p. 14.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Benjamin 1996, p. 260; Benjamin 1972, Volume 4, p. 18.
[101] Benjamin 1996, p. 263; Benjamin 1972, Volume 4, p. 21.
[102] Benjamin 1996, p. 259; Benjamin 1972, Volume 4, p. 17.

for the language and images of birthing to which he resorts are central to the myths of Creation and Eschaton in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Where the maternal body appears in Benjamin's reflections on the future (and also origin), the Bible seeps and spreads through his language and thought. But it is a Bible absorbed in terms of the two great poles of Creation and Eschaton – that is, a theological schema of history that derives from the anagogic level of allegorical exegesis.

Genesis

By now, it should be clear that I detect an underlying continuity amidst all the change in Benjamin's thought on history, that there are some deep connections between the *Trauerspielbuch* and the *Passagenarbeit* and the texts that fall around them. Up until now, I have tarried at the end of the history, at the Eschaton. But what of the other end of history, of the time of Creation and Paradise? In what follows, I focus on Genesis, a word with myriad overlays, for Benjamin returns time and again to the first chapters of the biblical text. I take two instances: the discussion of pure language in the essay 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man' and the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book.[103]

Language

In the language essay, Benjamin lays out a linguistic theory that features Adam, names and the Fall, in short a sustained exegesis of the first chapters of Genesis.[104] Here, he sets up his theory of language over against a series of ideological opponents that enable him to construct his response. Collectively, they appear under the empty 'bourgeois conception of language',[105] according to which language functions to communicate factual subject matter: 'It holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and

[103] Benjamin 1996, pp. 62–74; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, pp. 140–57.

[104] Indeed, in the same way that any biblical critic worth her salt must offer a reading of Genesis 1–3 at least once, so also philosophers, as well as literary and cultural critics, must all take a position on Benjamin's 'On Language' essay. Benjamin brings us all together, of course, by turning his essay around Genesis 1–3.

[105] Benjamin 1996, p. 65; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 144.

its addressee a human being'.[106] Further, bourgeois linguistic theory argues that there is an accidental relation between word and object, agreed to by some explicit or implied convention. Language is nothing other than a system of '*mere* signs'.[107] Yet, Benjamin does not respond to such a position with another; he prefers to account for it within his alternative theory.

Here, we move into an exegesis of Genesis 1–3 and then 11. The key is the Fall, but Benjamin reads the Tower of Babel (Gen 11) as a consequence of the Fall – although he does note that, in the biblical myth, it comes somewhat later.[108] And its consequences are multiplicity, of human languages and thereby of translations, and of human knowledge. Further, the prelapsarian nature of language, in which the word is the name, gives way to the human word, 'in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language'. But what is the nature of that new human word? 'The word must communicate *something* (other than itself). In that fact lies the true Fall of the spirit of language'.[109] This is none other than the bourgeois conception of language in which language communicates factual subject matter.

Benjamin then connects this 'externally communicating word' with the knowledge of Good and Evil – a promise delivered by the serpent. This knowledge is 'prattle [*Geschwätz*]',[110] which, in turn, leads to the judgement of expulsion from the Garden. Under the umbrella of prattle we find drawn the language and function of law, empty and communicative bourgeois language, and thereby confusion. Over against prattle, Benjamin is after the essential Edenic connection between the name and a thing, whereas, in the postlapsarian, the relation between sign and thing goes awry. All of this returns in the later essay on Karl Kraus,[111] where he explicitly argues that capitalism is the postlapsarian world in which Kraus resists the base 'prattle' of journalism, relevance and inauthentic language. Kraus, he argues, holds onto to the ideal language of creation, a latterday Adam for whom the language of naming is still an option in the time between Creation and the Eschaton.

---

[106] Ibid.
[107] Benjamin 1996, p. 69; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 150.
[108] Benjamin 1996, p. 70; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, pp. 151–2.
[109] Benjamin 1996, p. 71; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 153; italics in text.
[110] See Fenves 1996, p. 91.
[111] Benjamin 1999b, pp. 433–58; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, pp. 334–67.

The Fall then becomes the fulcrum of this essay, and, so far, I have lodged on our side of the Fall. But what about the prelapsarian theory of language that is so important for Benjamin? Benjamin argues that, in opposition to the bourgeois theory of language, such a pure language 'knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication. It means: *in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God*'.[112] Language does not communicate *through* language to another person; rather, by means of the name, it communicates *in* language with God. The name, 'the innermost nature of language itself',[113] has only God as its addressee. What we have here is an extraordinary theory for the auto-generational purity of language itself: the fertility of language can only be retained when man and God communicate with each other in language. It loses its potency when it is disseminated to others. And, as we might have expected, woman is absent – Eve only appears as one named by the man.

Yet all of this is only a beginning, for, once we pass over to the other side of the Fall, Benjamin engages directly with the text. Let us see what we find. Both accounts of Creation (Gen 1: 1–2: 3 and Gen 2: 3–25) emphasise for Benjamin a special relation between language and man through the act of creation. In the second account, it is as a being created from earth and endowed with the gift of language, whereas, in the first, it is the creative act of God that establishes a deep relation between 'Let there be…', 'he made' and 'he named'. For Benjamin, this produces the theological point that word and name are one only with God. However, a third feature of Genesis appears with the creation of human beings in Gen 1: 26–31: to be made in God's image means to know in the same language as God. Finally, the connection between human and divine languages is strongest with the name, firstly animal names and then human names. But only human beings give one another proper names (Adam names her 'woman' and then 'Eve'): 'The proper name is the communion of man with the *creative* word of God (Not the only one, however; man knows a further linguistic communion with God)'.[114] It is for this reason that there is an intrinsic relation between words and things.

---

[112] Benjamin 1996, p. 65; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 144; italics in text.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Benjamin 1996, p. 69; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 150.

Before asking what the implications of Benjamin's biblical linguistics might be, I am intrigued by his use of the Bible. He is not the first to delve into these texts in search of a theory of language, and he is not the first to come to grief. To begin with, his effort to find an emphasis on naming falters. For God's naming is restricted to the first three days of creation – he names day, night, heaven, earth and seas – and, by the time we get to the animals and plants, this power dissipates well before the creation of human beings. It is a push to say that the text focuses on naming at all. Further, even if we grant that language is indeed a concern of the texts that interest Benjamin – Genesis 1–3 and 11 – he still runs into problems with excising Chapter 4–10. For these chapters provide the crucial narrative links between the Fall and Babel, via the murder of Abel by Cain (Genesis 4), the Flood (Genesis 6–9) and the genealogies (Genesis 5 and 10). Further, in Genesis 10, before the Babel narrative, we already find a dispersal of languages – the peoples there are organised 'by their families, by their languages, in their lands, by their peoples' (Gen 10: 31; translation mine; see also 10: 5, 20). Babel may indeed be another Fall narrative, but the links with Genesis 2–3 are problematic at best. Thirdly, not only does Benjamin forget that the serpent and woman also speak, but he slips up with the assertion that 'Of all beings, man is the only one who names his own kind, as he is the only one whom God did not name'.[115] But the man actually names cattle, birds and beasts (Gen 2: 20) as well as the woman. In fact, she is on a continuum with the animals rather than of the same kind as Adam, for the purpose of Adam's naming in Genesis 2 seems to be to find a 'helper' – the woman appears as the last in the line of animals (Gen 2: 22–3).

There is trouble in paradise, it would seem. If his exegetical garden is not quite what we might have expected, Benjamin attempts to forestall this prelapsarian disappointment at the beginning of his reading of Genesis 1–3:

> If in what follows the nature of biblical language is considered on the basis of the first chapter of Genesis, the object is neither biblical interpretation nor subjection of the Bible to objective consideration as revealed truth (*offenbarte Wahrheit*), but the discovery of what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regard to the nature of language; and the Bible is only *initially* indispensable for this purpose, because the present argument broadly

[115] Benjamin 1996, p. 69; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 149.

> follows it in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical. The Bible, in regarding itself as revelation, must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts.[116]

Benjamin's reading is, of course, selective: he is interested in the metaphysics of language,[117] particularly as an ultimate reality that connects God and man. However, there is a curious twist that takes place in this passage. Although it begins with an effort to follow the Bible on the question of language, to mine it for linguistic insights, by the end a small inversion takes place. The Bible neither speaks *about* language, nor can one *follow* the Bible in order to construct a linguistic theory: the Bible itself *is* a language, the language of revelation. But note what happens: at the moment when Benjamin appears to dispense with the Bible – it is only "initially indispensable" – he turns again to claim its continuing relevance: 'The Bible, in regarding itself as revelation (*Offenbarung*), must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts'.[118] In other words, there may be problems in this linguistic paradise, but it is better than the other side of the bourgeois Fall.

Ursprung

If the language of sex, birth and the maternal body forms a backdrop to the language essay – there really is no room for woman in Paradise for all of the creative activity belongs to God and man – then the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book brings it all to the foreground. I think here particularly of the famous section on origin, *Ursprung*. Readings of Benjamin's use of the term tend to locate it in the matrix of German philosophy and the Platonic tradition, but what is missing here is a theological appreciation of the term.[119] With the introduction of 'origin' into the discussion, Benjamin focuses yet again on the first chapters of Genesis – a factor simply not noticed by critics. The question of origin ceases to be a profane, human activity, but must now

---

[116] Benjamin 1996, p. 67; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 147.
[117] As Hent de Vries points out: De Vries 1992.
[118] Benjamin 1996, p. 67; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 147.
[119] Only Ebach notes in passing that Benjamin's interest in *Ursprung* relates to Genesis 1–11 (Ebach 1982, p. 63). Ebach's essay, while a welcome consideration of Benjamin's treatment of the Hebrew Bible, goes too far in suggesting the influence of the book of Job, and he understands biblical criticism purely in terms of a now outmoded historical-critical method.

be recast as divine origin. And it should be no surprise that his discussion of origin should not only utilise the biblical material in Genesis, but also the language of birth and sex.

In the second section of the prologue, Benjamin's recourse to the concept of origin is the culmination of an effort to deal with the historical dimension of art. This critique operates at a number of levels: against inductive and empiricist literary history, against the deductive and classificatory principle of genre studies, and against the alternative notion of a 'genetic and concrete classification', which, according to Croce's *Grundriss der Ästhetik*,[120] is not classification at all but History. It is with 'origin' that Croce's 'genetic classification' can be reconciled with an idealist theory of art forms. There follows the by now famous section:

> Origin (*Ursprung*), although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis (*Entstehung*). The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance (*dem Werden und Vergehen Entspringendes*). Origin is an eddy (*Strudel*) in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fulfilled, in the totality of its history.[121]

The steps by which Benjamin disconnects and reconnects the concept of origin here are quite bewildering. At first, he breaks the link between *Ursprung* and *Entstehung*, origin and genesis, all the while keeping origin as an historical category. Already at this point, the biblical reference is obvious: does he want to disavow genesis, or does he argue for the prior status of origin? It

---

[120] Benjamin 1998, p. 45; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 226, cites Croce, *Grundriss der Ästhetik. Vier Vorlesungen*. Autorisierte deutsche Ausg. Von Theodor Poppe, Leipzig, 1913 (Wissen und Forschen), p. 43.

[121] Benjamin 1998, pp. 45–6; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 30.

appears to be the latter, for origin is part of the 'process of becoming and disappearance' rather than coming into being – genesis. Is becoming and disappearance the historical process, although it evokes not so much life and death, beginning and end, as the perpetual process itself? Benjamin now turns to specify more closely what 'emerges': 'an eddy (or maelstrom)[122] in the stream of becoming'. But he can only do so through the image of a liquid current, a river perhaps with its currents and rapids. Genesis now returns, although in a secondary capacity, its 'material' swallowed by the stream of becoming in which origin is an eddy.

Apart from the inability of commentators to notice that this is theological commentary on the creation myth of Genesis, the tendency of Benjamin to revert to sexual terminology and associations also passes by without notice,[123] although it is precisely the point where Christian theology and biblical exegesis merge, both obsessed with the questions of origin and Eschaton. Terms and images, such as coming 'into being', 'emergence', the process of becoming and disappearance, nakedness, rhythm, duality, but, above all, the liquid metaphor – the wetness, fluids and ecstasy of sex, orgasm and birth – with its currents, eddies and swallowing are all charged with a sexual dimension, 'saturated', as are all his texts, according to Eva Geulen, 'with the imagery of gendered eroticism'.[124] Yet it is not merely sexual, for such a reading misses the appropriation of maternal birthing for the notion of origin, as well as genesis and creation. But is not Benjamin immersed in the whole question of myths of biblical creation, of which his text becomes yet another contribution? Birth, creation, genesis and so on are, of course, the acts of women, which Benjamin, not unexpectedly, both fails to note and exacerbates in his commentary.

Elsewhere he is more explicit, as in the essay 'The Life of Students' – one among a range of many early texts in which sexual and intellectual activity interact with each other[125] – where he argues for the recovery of the eros of creativity in male students. In a utopian manifesto that comes out of the youth movement, he distinguishes between the different forms of creativity

---

[122] Weber 1991, p. 468, translates *Strudel* as 'maelstrom' rather than 'eddy'.

[123] So, for instance, in Weber's (Weber 1991) detailed exegesis that itself smacks of biblical interpretation, or in Pizer's search for the origin of Benjamin's discussion of origin in Goethe (Pizer 1989). See also McCole 1993, pp. 152–3.

[124] Geulen 1996, p. 169.

[125] See Weigel 1996, pp. 86–7.

by men and women and how they might work together in a new community. He wants to transform the creativity of men – currently caught in the opposition between the autonomy of creative spirit and nature (prostitution) – to include women, 'who are not productive in the masculine sense',[126] into a community of creative persons based on love, a revolution of the sexes, as he argues elsewhere, based on Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But he remains trapped in a distinction between creativity and procreation, the one a distinct act and the other repetitive: 'How could they [men] do justice to the image of mankind and at the same time share a community with women and children, whose productivity is of a different kind'.[127] Careful as he is to avoid ranking such creativity or productivity, it still assumes that the creativity of men is somehow *sui generis*, independent of women. The appropriation remains linguistic: 'Through understanding, everyone will succeed in liberating the future from its deformed existence in the womb of the present'.[128] In short, as Geulen notes, the most prominent erotic and gendered dimension of Benjamin's work is sexual reproduction, including pregnancy, procreation, conception, birth and childhood.[129]

The vigorous feminist responses to Benjamin's work tend to criticise his representations of women and their uses in the structures of his thought,[130] or Benjamin's work is taken up as an insightful and political criticism of the uses of women within capitalism, art, philosophy and so on.[131] What I have noted in Benjamin's work in terms of creation and the maternal body is not new in itself, especially the appropriation of maternal creation for notions of male artistic creativity.[132] However, let me pick up two elements from Eva

---

[126] Benjamin 1996, p. 44; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 84.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Benjamin 1996, p. 46; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 87.
[129] Geulen 1996, p. 162, although she goes on to argue that the most eroticised figure is the child.
[130] Chow 1989, pp. 63–86; Stoljar 1996, pp. 99–112; Wolff 1989, pp. 141–56.
[131] So Weigel 1996, pp. 85–98; Leslie 2000, pp. 106–14; Rauch 1988.
[132] Thus, for Weigel, Benjamin shows how 'the concept of intellectual creation replaces that of natural creation, a process in which the female element necessary to it is consumed and exhausted, while the creator is newly born at the very same moment as the work is completed: as "the first-born male of the work that he once conceived"' (Weigel 1996, p. 70). Yet, Weigel reads Benjamin as too much of proto-feminist critic. For a more balanced critique in terms of Kristeva's notion of 'abjection' (mothers without children), see Geyer-Ryan 1992.

Geulen's excellent essay:[133] the ambiguity of gender in his work and the need to reconsider Benjamin's primary philosophical concerns in terms of gender – language, history, experience and materiality. It is less a question of ambiguity, it seems to me, than Benjamin's knack of offering a criticism that simultaneously traps him within that which he criticises. Thus, his criticism concerning the appropriation of women is analogous to his criticism of myth: he sees the problems and yet cannot move beyond them no matter how hard he tries. For instance, even though he registers the profound reification and commodification of women in terms of the prostitute, woman-as-things that shows up the reality of 'love' in capitalism, he is all the same lured by the prostitute as a figure for knowledge. Or, his use of the traditional terminology of birth and creation in entirely foreign, anti-aesthetic contexts, especially allegory and technology, must be seen alongside his usage of such terminology in the most conventional of places, the imagination of a new future beyond the present.[134]

Such ambivalence is characteristic of Benjamin's treatment of myth as well: the resolute opponent of myth finds that he must use myth – particularly the stories of creation and apocalypse from the Bible – in order to attempt to go beyond myth. But the connection between the question of gender and myth is much closer. Here, I pick up Geulen's suggestion that we need to reconsider Benjamin's major interests in terms of gender. My argument is that the continual appropriation of the maternal body, of conception, pregnancy and birth, is a signal of another problem in Benjamin's writing, namely the perpetuation of biblical myth. In fact, the mechanism by which he appropriates such images of procreation is to signal their removal from women under capitalism, who now become sterile prostitutes, corpses and mannequins, frivolous foci of fashion.[135] Any creative process rests entirely with the break from capitalism. And the signal of this link comes in the theses 'On the Philosophy of History' where the prostitute threatens the virility of the revolution; 'The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called "Once

---

[133] Geulen 1996.

[134] In a dialectical move, Geulen (Geulen 1996, 166) goes on to argue that is it precisely ambivalence itself, a characteristic feature of Benjamin's work, that is the mark of sexuality and erotic desire. Her effort to bring in the hermaphrodite in order to deal with such ambivalence sidesteps the question of sexual difference in Benjamin's writings.

[135] Benjamin 1999a, pp. 79–81; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, pp. 130–2.

upon a time" in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history'.[136] Resisting the emptying of his semen into the body of the whore where it remains unproductive, he holds it back in order to blow into history itself. The anti-maternal figure of the prostitute allows Benjamin to appropriate the maternal function for his own work.

To return to the passage on origin: the more specifically theological structure of this passage appears clearly towards its close. The 'dual insight' required to perceive origin must be aware of a simultaneous process of re-establishment and incompletion, of redemption and the imperfection of that redemption. But this is nothing other than the proleptic view of history characteristic of certain forms of Christian theology: the process of restoration or redemption has already begun but it is as yet incomplete, awaiting the final moment. The model here is Christ, for in his birth redemption began its precarious but certain path, engulfing the earlier patterns of redemption in Jewish thought. Yet, full redemption awaits his final return. But one could construct a similar pattern in strands of the Hebrew Bible where the revelation of the Torah to Moses on Sinai begins a process of redemption that will be fulfilled only with the messiah; Christianity then appropriates this for itself. Benjamin thus works with a proleptic eschatology characteristic of certain parts of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. The Eschaton is not only the moment of redemption, but also the full revelation of that which has been seen dimly until that moment.

Once again we find a peculiar sacred history, or more specifically biblical construction of history, operating in Benjamin's work. This is, in the context of the philosophy of history and art history, an extraordinary move to make, except that Benjamin's usage is always turned in a curious direction. So also with this origin passage, for he seems to remove the notion of origin from its immediate sense of genesis or beginning in order to let it float free in the longer expanse of the history with which he works. The image becomes one of a whole series of 'origins' – he is, after all, speaking about the work of art – that emerge in history, all of which then become part of the proleptic redemption that his philosophy of history postulates.

---

[136] Benjamin 1992, p. 254; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 702.

Thoroughly immersed in what can only be termed a history of salvation, *Heilsgeschichte*, dependent as it is on a theological reading of biblical texts – a reading that exacerbates the mythical nature of these texts – I want to return at last the *Passagenarbeit*. Here, Benjamin seeks a way of conceiving the end of capitalism, itself a hellish myth, in very similar terms, those of the myths of Creation and Eschaton. Not only does he pursue the question of a break out of capitalism, for the *Passagenarbeit* is itself concerned with origin:

> In studying Simmel's presentation of Goethe's concept of truth, I came to see very clearly that my concept of origin in the *Trauerspiel* book is a rigorous and decisive transposition of this basic Goethean concept from the domain of nature to that of history. Origin – it is, in effect, the concept of *Ur*-phenomenon extracted from the pagan context of nature and brought into the Jewish contexts of history. Now, in my work on the arcades I am equally concerned with fathoming an origin. To be specific, I pursue the origin of the forms and mutations of the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline, and I locate this origin in the economic facts. Seen from the standpoint of causality, however (and that means considered as causes), these facts would not be primal phenomena; they become such insofar as in their own individual development – 'unfolding' might be a better term – they give rise to the whole series of the arcade's concrete historical forms, just as the leaf unfolds from itself all the riches of the empirical world of plants.[137]

Apart from the conventional distinction that occurs here between pagan myth (nature) and Jewish history, the transposition of both origin and the mythic explosion of the Eschaton from his earlier work to the *Passagenarbeit*, although now with a materialist register, seems complete.

Salvation history [*Heilsgeschichte*]: the return of biblical myth

Thus far, I have argued that Benjamin at first describes and then adapts for his own use allegorical interpretation, a very theological form of biblical interpretation. He then goes on, in the *Passagenarbeit*, to seek an alternative mode of breaking out of the nightmare myth of capitalism. But it is one that

[137] Benjamin 1999a, p. 462; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 577.

makes use of the language of sex and maternal functions. At first, it seemed as though this was a feature of his concern with the end of history, whether in the *Passagenarbeit*, the theses 'On History' or the translation essay. But then I also traced a very similar language in his obsession with Genesis, particularly in his essay 'On Language' and the *Trauerspiel* book.

As the final step of my argument, I want to suggest that, at various points, the fragments of a theory of history show up in these texts, a theory that is both indebted to the final or anagogic level of allegorical interpretation and the notion of *Heilsgeschichte*, or salvation history, that is steeped in the history of German theology and philosophy. But let me track how such a theory emerges more explicitly in his thought. The key is his notion of fulfilled time [*der erfüllten Zeit*] or historical time [*Die Zeit der Geschichte, historischen Zeit*], for which a number of other crucial adjectives appear: 'The idea of fulfilled time is the dominant historical idea of the Bible: it is the idea of messianic time'.[138]

Here, we find a remarkable continuity from his early work to his latest. Thus, in the early essay, 'Trauerspiel and Tragedy',[139] Benjamin characterises the *Trauerspiel* by the emergence of mechanical time. The terminology varies but the argument is the same: mechanical (or natural) time is concerned with empirical events; it is measurable, spatial, concerned with magnitude and regularity.[140] He will call this 'natural history' in the *Trauerspeil* book, marked by profound spatialisation in which classification, taxonomy and topology dominate. The outcome of such a shift is that time becomes an endless, natural process that may manifest itself as the eternal repetition that fascinates him in the *Passagenarbeit* or as the schema of decline and restoration. In the final theses 'On the Philosophy of History' the terminology shifts again: now he writes of 'homogeneous, empty time'.[141] But it is the same as natural or mechanical time: what we get is historicism and universal history, 'the sequence of events

---

[138] Benjamin 1996, pp. 55–6; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 134.

[139] Benjamin 1996, pp. 55–7; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, pp. 133–7.

[140] Three inauthentic temporalities were the result of the spatialisation of historical time into 'natural history' in baroque drama: chronological time, its inversion or acme, and the eternal return of the same (see Hanssen 1998, pp. 9–65). Hanssen 1998, pp. 59–65.

[141] Benjamin 1992, p. 255; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 702.

like the beads of a rosary',[142] and, above all, the faith in progress, as something boundless, irresistible and for all 'mankind'.

Yet this shift to natural history, to a spatialised, mechanical time, with its great concern over decline, restoration and the perpetual repetition of history provides the possibility for allegory. Thus, during the baroque, and then in much fuller form in nineteenth-century capitalism, allegory emerges from such a shift, appearing in the *Trauerspiele*, for here 'history merges into the setting';[143] 'natural setting increasingly intrudes into the dramatic action'.[144] Later, Benjamin wants to carry this argument into the Arcades of the nineteenth century: 'Pursue the question of whether a connection exists between the secularization of time in space and the allegorical mode of perception'.[145] By the *Passagenarbeit*, he extends the analysis to argue that natural history was not only the form of history in capitalism but also enabled the connection with myth or ur-history.[146] Capitalism, therefore, does not merely draw upon ur-history in order to generate its own myths: capitalism, as the realm of natural history, is itself the realm of nature, of barbarism, myth and ur-history, raised to a new height. This means that capitalism not so much creates out of whole cloth, but it takes up various elements from previous modes of production and raises them to new intensity and transparency.

In response to such natural history or mechanical time, Benjamin speaks of both 'historical time' and 'fulfilled time'. Historical time may be 'infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment'.[147] Apparently endless, like natural history, it is distinguished from natural history through its non-empirical status. The key difference, however, is that historical time may become complete, fulfilled time, a 'process that is perfect in historical terms'.[148] Refusing concepts of both objective and subjective time, historical time is none other than theological, or more strictly biblical time. 'The idea of fulfilled time

---

[142] Benjamin 1992, p. 255; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 702. For a more detailed discussion of 'historicism' and its connection with the universal history of the victors over against Benjamin's own kairological notion of history, see Müller 1996.

[143] Benjamin 1998, p. 92; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 271; see also Benjamin 1998, p. 177; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 353.

[144] Benjamin 1998, p. 93; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 272.

[145] Benjamin 1999a, p. 472; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 590.

[146] See Buck-Morss 1989, p. 64.

[147] Benjamin 1996, p. 55; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 134.

[148] Ibid.

is the dominant historical idea of the Bible: it is the idea of messianic time'.[149] And messianic time is none other than 'divinely fulfilled time'.[150]

Here, of course, we enter one of the most enduring features of Benjamin's thought, one that has influenced Derrida, Agamben and Butler, among others. It is a notion of the messianic without the Messiah – his use of the adjective rather than the substantive is telling, as is his notion of a 'weak messianic time'. Indeed, the messianic appears in Benjamin's thought when he begins to reflect about history, particularly the future and what that holds. But the appeal of the messianic is that it embodies a paradox, simultaneously currently effective and retarding elements, moving both towards us and allowing us to approach it.[151] It is, if you like, a proleptic idea, in which the time of the future has already begun and yet we await its fulfilment.

The messianic is one of the most contested sites in Benjamin's work, for Marxists uneasy with this material have argued that it is merely an image, a cipher, for the philosophy of history. Others have used it to point to the inherently religious nature of Marxism itself, given to an eschatological form of politics. Others again take them as figures for each other without giving priority to either.[152] The problems, however, lie elsewhere.

Firstly, the messianic really is a misnomer for eschatology. It is worth insisting on this point: eschatology is the broadest and probably earliest biblical category. Its concern is with the transition from the present somewhat undesirable age to another that is qualitatively better, a shift from hardship to peace and plenty. In all cases, it is Yahweh, the main god of the Hebrew Bible, who brings in the better world. It is only with the prophetic literature that eschatology emerges as a distinct genre. The generic markers are quite clear: Yahweh's agency, an end to social, economic and bodily ills, a new age of freedom and plenty, and an unavoidable use of figurative language.

Messianism, too often regarded as a defining feature of eschatology, is usually assumed by biblical scholars to be a subset of eschatology. In this case, a particular individual, divinely appointed and directed, effects the transition from old to new. The Messiah, or 'the anointed one', is in the earlier material

---

[149] Benjamin 1996, pp. 55–6; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 134.
[150] Benjamin 1996, p. 56; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, p. 134.
[151] See Benjamin 1996, p. 213; Benjamin 1972, Volume 6, p. 126.
[152] So Balfour 1991, pp. 622–47. He argues that the 'anders gesagt' of the Theses points to this figural double-take.

mostly a royal figure based around the figure of King David, but then later, especially at Qumran in the Dead Sea Scrolls, we find royal, priestly and possibly a prophetic messiah for whom Moses, Aaron and Elijah become the models. Of course, the Christians will claim Jesus as Messiah as well, but, by this stage, messianic eschatology is much more highly developed and depends very much on the saviour figure. There is a distinct logic to the connection between eschatology and messianism, for, if God brings about the Eschaton, then he may as well delegate the task to a chosen individual. Indeed, the edges become fuzzy, for it can be a small step from the prophet who announces Yahweh's eschatological word to the Messiah himself.

The third and latest category is the genre of apocalyptic. Although it also has at base the move from old to new, here we have a body of revealed knowledge (*apokaluptein* in Greek) about the end times, efforts at very specific calculations of the end usually through calendars and numerology, a dualism between Good and Evil, between God and the Devil and a host of angels and demons, an esoteric method of interpreting the sacred scriptures to find hidden messages, and an overly metaphoric language that provides a coded narrative of the end times. I am as sceptical about its benefits as I am concerning messianism, if only because of the reactionary crackpots who engage in apocalyptic speculation today. A deeper reason lies in the radical dependence of apocalyptic on divine intervention and the absolute necessity of the saviour or redeemer figure. All the same, apocalyptic is not completely without virtue, for it cranks up the expectation of the end, rendering it imminent rather than off in a somewhat distant future. Yet, while such fervour for the end means you cannot get comfortable in the present age, it is also notorious for failed predictions and futile political action that expects God to arrive with his chariots and horsemen.

Unfortunately, eschatology becomes entangled all too quickly with the closely related messianism and apocalyptic, so that eschatology becomes an all-bracing term that includes the other two. Often, the three terms are confused with each other, taken as alternatives for the same phenomenon, namely the destruction of this age and the inauguration of a new one under some form of divine directive. But I need to insist that they are distinct categories, seeping into each other at the edges, with their own characteristics. And I should stress that although they are taken as religious and social phenomena, eschatology, apocalyptic and messianism are primarily literary categories,

genres of biblical and extra-biblical literature in their own right. For these reasons, I would prefer to speak of the eschatological rather than the messianic in Benjamin's thought.

But there is a second problem with the debates over the messianic or eschatological in Benjamin's thought: the Bible is no less mythological than other creation narratives (of the world, of the people, of the land) or indeed than hopes for personal and collective redemption. But, here, I return to my criticism of Benjamin, that, despite all his efforts, he replicates the myth he so assiduously seeks to overcome. For some strange reason, Benjamin felt that the biblical material was free of myth. Thus, in his 'Critique of Violence',[153] mythic violence, that narrative of the establishment of the law and legal violence, is something that belongs to the Greeks (Benjamin cites the myth of Niobe), whereas pure or divine violence, the arena in which the Messiah was to appear, is somehow free of myth (in this case, Benjamin favours the story of the rebellion of the sons of Korah in Numbers 16). McCole points out that Benjamin was also influenced by Hermann Cohen's argument that Judaism was the religion of reason over against myth, which, for Benjamin, was always irrational and demonic: theology is thereby set over against myth.[154] Apart from the obvious point that the Hebrew Bible is as mythical as any other mythology, especially that of Greece, Benjamin cannot avoid, even in this text as Tom McCall argues, keeping myth away from pure, revolutionary and messianic violence.[155] Such violence does not break out of myth, it merely uses one myth to counter another.

What then, is historical, messianic and divinely fulfilled time? For Benjamin, it is a narrative of the beginning and end of history, specifically understood in terms of the Fall and Eschaton. 'At the centre of the *Trauerspiel* book… stood a postlapsarian narrative'.[156] In other words, he embraces a biblical notion of history as historical or fulfilled time, a history of salvation – *Heilsgeschichte* – that had its own tradition in German theology and is much more extensive

[153] Benjamin 1996, pp. 236–52; Benjamin 1972, Volume 2, pp. 179–203.
[154] McCole 1993, p. 76.
[155] McCall 1996, p. 188.
[156] Hanssen 1998, p. 99 See also Mosès 1995, pp. 139–54, as well as Gilloch 2002, pp. 60–2. I have favoured Hanssen's description over that of Helga Geyer-Ryan who emphasises fragmentation and montage over against continuity and progress (Geyer-Ryan 1988, pp. 66–79).

than a messianic theory of history or even the simple notion of Creation, Fall and Redemption.[157] Rather, *Heilsgeschichte* is God's history, which touches that of the world only tangentially and at significant redemptive moments, running at cross-purposes to human history. It is therefore fragmentary and momentary, leaving behind traces. Yet, this divine history is the truth that can be glimpsed only partially, awaiting the Eschaton.[158] It is this notion of *Heilsgeschichte* upon which Benjamin draws, giving it his own twist. At times, the translations elide his usage of the term. Thus, Osborne's translation of the *Trauerspiel* book unaccountably glosses *Heilsgeschichte* as the 'story of the life of Christ', rather than the history of salvation.[159]

What we have is an underlying biblical schema of history. Yet, a problem emerges, for Benjamin's apparently biblical history is in fact a theological appropriation from a variety of biblical materials. The notion of a salvation history, particularly in the context of German Lutheran scholarship, extrapolates from a text in which various creation stories may be found, notions of an Eschaton sit side by side with those that see none, tensions exist between an individual and collective afterlife and none at all, and patterns of eternal return. In Benjamin's writing, theology dominates the biblical, selecting material from the Bible in order to create the various pieces of an unconventional theory of history with which he would fiddle from time to time.

The question remains as to why Benjamin would make such a move, for he is no theological apologist. Rather, his recourse to a theological schema of history attempts to deal with developments in historiography that could only be seen, from his perspective, as detrimental to the discipline itself: the effects of the natural sciences, natural law and anthropology on historiography. Hence his polemic against what he calls natural or mechanical history. But there is another dimension based on the opposition between nature

---

[157] See McCole 1993, pp. 160–10 on the romaticist influence on Benjamin's thought in this regard. Even Howard Caygill's argument – that Benjamin is more interested, following the image of the rainbow in the story of Noah, in the function of the new covenant after the storm of history – reinforces the eschatological tone of Benjamin's work, however much Caygill may lament the deleterious effect of the eschatological for Benjamin (Caygill 1998, pp. 149–52).

[158] Buck-Morss unwittingly provides an excellent description of such a notion of salvation history in her discussion of the revolutionary break via the dialectical image that moves between empirical history and messianic time (Buck-Morss 1989, pp. 242–3).

[159] Benjamin 1998, p. 182; Benjamin 1972, Volume 1, p. 358.

and history: the sciences mark a return to the dominance of nature, the realm of pagan thought that stands over against the distinctly historical nature of Jewish and Christian thought. On this point, Benjamin takes up, like Bloch, the common but highly problematic assumption that the Hebrew Bible marks a break from such pagan patterns of thought, the emergence of history from myth.[160] Finally, through his use of the Hebrew Bible and theological material, Benjamin sought to reconstruct another history of thought itself, an alternative intellectual genealogy that broke with the line that ran from classical Greece, through Rome and early Christianity into medieval and then modern Europe. Although heavily theological, it is a theology that favours the Hebrew Bible, a document that troubles the classicist genealogy and its inherent anti-Semitism. If in his earlier work Benjamin made use of such material to counter problems in German and European thought, in his later material he attempts to rescue Marxism from similar difficulties. Thus, in the most theoretical section of the *Passagenarbeit*, Konvolut N, he attempts to rescue historical materialism from the temptation of thinking in terms of progress and decline, 'two sides of one and the same thing'.[161] This is another version of natural history and is a far cry from *Heilsgeschichte* with its two markers of Fall and Eschaton, within which we find but fragments and flotsam.

Conclusion

The various steps of my argument, from the description and then appropriation of allegory to a theory of history that has Creation, Fall and Eschaton as its markers, have highlighted a distinct problem: Benjamin's efforts to overcome myth, especially the hellish myth of capitalism, makes use of another myth to do so. And that myth is biblical myth, or rather a theological appropriation of certain elements from the Bible that could only exacerbate its mythical dimensions.[162]

---

[160] See the representative collection edited by Anderson 1984.

[161] Benjamin 1999a, p. 460; Benjamin 1972, Volume 5, p. 575.

[162] *Contra* Graeme Gilloch (Gilloch 1997, pp. 9–13, 174–7), who argues that in a fourth sense of myth – its use as trope or metaphor – Benjamin wants dialectically to preserve that which is good about myth, namely that contained in mimesis, play, intoxication and intuition. The other three senses – error, creaturely compulsion and the inversion of submission to nature in modernity – must be read alongside Winfried Menninghaus's detailed essay that traces myth in relation to space, language, beauty

Yet it seems to me that something may be retrieved from Benjamin's failure, an insight into the possibilities of myth despite himself.[163] Let me take a move out of Benjamin's own pages, specifically a dialectical one that has its own history within theology. Not only are the various terms from the present used in their imperfect way – contradictions of capitalism, the dialectical image, the blast out of history – to give us a fleeting glimpse of that other future: the communist future in fact provides the terms with which we might understand our present, although those terms are but very imperfect derivatives of what that future contains. In other words, rather than taking terms from our present and projecting them into the future, Benjamin seeks to work in reverse: the terms and concepts of a communist future, however degraded and partial they might be in our present perception and use of them, provide the way to think about that future itself.

The problem, of course, is that, if the future is as radically distinct – however gradual or sudden a transition might be – as Marxists like to think, then the very ways of thinking and arguing will also be qualitatively different. Here lies the reason for the unwitting insight that Benjamin's use of an allegorical method, in itself a theological mode of biblical interpretation, provides. It is not that such a method provides the resources for conceiving the transformation out of the mythic hell of capitalism: rather, the inescapably mythic nature of the material with which Benjamin works – the narratives of Creation and Eschaton – suggest that the language of myth, with all its promises and dangers, provides one way of imagining a very different future. What Benjamin needs, in other words, is Bloch's practice of the discernment of myth. It is here that notions like pure language, the eschatology of translation, and the reflections on creation, take on a different hue. The danger is that such

---

and time (Menninghaus 1991, pp. 292–325). Via Benjamin's connection between dream and myth, Menninghaus argues that, in the final stage of his thought, the positive and negative dimensions of myth achieve equilibrium so that the blasting out of myth becomes a dialectical escape and rescue of myth. I am less optimistic about this possibility, for, although I agree with Menninghaus that myth continues in Benjamin's thought, it appears despite his best efforts to overcome it.

[163] Habermas (Habermas 1979) also wants to retrieve something from Benjamin's failure, although, in this case, it is a theory of language and communication that can be retrieved and reworked from the detritus of a failed effort to break through myth while 'preserving and liberating its wealth', specifically in terms of its semantic potential (p. 50). By contrast, I want to suggest that the failure itself is the important feature of Benjamin's work.

mythological material will replicate the patterns of oppression and appropriation of the myths from which they draw, in Benjamin's case specifically with regard to women. However, it is not merely that myth provides one option, an alternative language that falls into all of the patterns of previous and current myths: Benjamin's promising failure is that the use of such curiously mythical ideas and terms from the Bible raises the possibility of conjuring up an alternative language and the ability to imagine a very different future.

This means that Benjamin's allegorical method not only generates the failure of his overt proposal but also becomes an appropriate method for what I am suggesting. It is not, as the anti-allegorical polemic of biblical criticism has argued for so long, that allegory seeks a wooden one-to-one correspondence to various items in the text. On the contrary, allegory, particularly in Benjamin's hands, might be seen to reach across the divide between a capitalist present and a communist future to draw terms from that future itself, however imperfect they might be. The question remains as to whether the mythological material that runs through Benjamin's writing is able to do the job. In terms of specific content, no, but in terms of the effort to think differently, then myth provides one way of doing so.

Chapter Three

The Ecclesiastical Eloquence of Louis Althusser

> I remember this period as a time when perhaps I had a religious vocation which fizzled out and a certain predisposition to ecclesiastical eloquence (pour l'éloquence ecclésiastique).[1]
>
> Marx did not 'say everything', not only because he did not have the time, but because to 'say everything' makes no sense for a scientist; only a religion can pretend to 'say everything'.[2]

For one who was once attracted to a religious vocation – later described as merely the appeal of 'ecclesiastical eloquence'[3] – Althusser's passing over of religion seems to be complete.[4] Thus, in the essay 'Lenin and Philosophy' he writes of the Otzovist group of the Bolsheviks, formed after the failed October revolution of 1905: 'Some Bolsheviks of this group even wanted to integrate into Marxism the "authentic" humane values of religion, and to this end they called themselves "God-builders." But we can ignore this'.[5] Much of his writing does seem to

---

[1] Althusser 1994b, p. 306: Althusser 1992, p. 299.
[2] Althusser 1990, p. 59.
[3] Althusser 1994b, p. 306; Althusser 1992, p. 299.
[4] Many critics have followed him, completely ignoring Althusser's engagement with theology. See Callinicos 1976, Elliott 1987, Clarke 1980.
[5] Althusser 1972, p. 26; Althusser 1969c, p. 10.

'ignore this', for materialism, the 'world outlook' of the proletariat, had set its face over against the idealism of the bourgeoisie. Yet, Althusser is a little too hasty in his dismissal, for he was never quite able to find his way clear of religion, or, more specifically, the Church.

In what follows, I trace Althusser's perpetual effort to reject the Church, a rejection that relies upon its continued presence in his work. In fact, my major argument is precisely this, namely that Althusser's expulsion of the Church from his life and work enabled the Church to permeate all of his work. Not so much a return of the repressed, the Church becomes, in Althusser's own words, the absent cause of his philosophy. So I will follow this subterranean presence of the ecclesial, its shortfalls and promises, the possibilities and limitations for Althusser's own thought. Althusser is therefore a 'catholic' Marxist, sliding between the catholicity of the Church itself, especially the Roman-Catholic Church, and the internationalism of Marxism that worked itself out in the specific dynamics of a particular nation-state. Althusser's own 'catholicity' becomes the necessary feature of his rejection of the Roman-Catholic Church.

I have organised my discussion in two broad stages: the difficult path of Althusser's departure from the Church and then the way the Church continues to permeate his later work as an absent cause. In the first part, I argue that the form of Althusser's rejection of religion is not so much in terms of theology or the Bible, but of the Church with which he had a lingering connection after many years of involvement and religious commitment. The context of a Roman-Catholic country was crucial in this respect, for, in a situation where class struggle took a distinctly institutional form, the Church was the primary point of reference. Not only does the form of his work remain stamped by the institutional and social matrix of the Church, but, with surprising regularity, questions of religion and the Church also appear in his later Marxist texts. The work of the fully-fledged Marxist philosopher trails the dust of this earlier work.

In the second major part of this chapter, I trace the residues of the Church in some of his most influential work. Althusser comes around, unwillingly perhaps, to the position that Marxism itself must also consider religion. After all, religion also belongs to the spontaneous 'world outlook' of materialism. This is less of a paradox than it seems, for along with ethical, legal, political

and aesthetic 'practical ideologies',[6] religion is one of the practical ideologies with which both idealist and materialist world outlooks operate. When such positions become 'theoretical' – for Althusser, the connection between science and the ideologies of science and scientists – philosophy appears. As 'class struggle in theory', as something learnt from the spontaneous world outlooks of both idealism and materialism, philosophy must also deal with religion. The logic in this dimension of his thought means that Althusser must also consider religion from within Marxism.

Ecclesiastical form: theological writings

That Althusser's rejection of religion should take the form of a rejection of the Church is perhaps inevitable given his own former commitment to the Roman-Catholic Church. But this gives (auto)biography a prior and formative role in the development of his philosophy. Rather, autobiography comes in Althusser's writing at the end, the last and only sustained act of his intellectual work, and so I turn to biography in my conclusion; a little like the central station at Saint-Charles in Marseille, the 'terminus' that he 'always loved',[7] rather than as a beginning that sets the agenda for everything that follows.

I could begin with the obvious point that Althusser could not seem to exist without one institution or another, whether church, university (Catholic or the Sorbonne), mental hospital or Communist party, with its overwhelming concern for orthodoxy and orthopraxis.[8] But I prefer to focus on what can only be called his theological writings, a description that estranges the usual reading of Althusser as a scientific Marxist.[9] In particular, I offer a detailed exegesis

---

[6] Althusser 1972, p. 18; Althusser 1998, pp. 152–3.

[7] Althusser 1994b, p. 82; Althusser 1992, p. 75.

[8] Althusser 1990, p. 63. In his account of his intervention at the meeting in which Lacan sought to dissolve the École Freudienne de Paris in 1980, entitled 'Open Letter to Analysands and Analysts in Solidarity with Jacques Lacan' (Althusser 1996, pp. 127–34), he writes: 'since I had evoked my experience of two organizations other than the one whose meeting I was attending, namely, the Catholic church and the French Communist party' (Althusser 1996, p. 132).

[9] Only some critics can bear to mention Althusser's earlier commitment to the Church, let alone his theological writings. For instance, Margaret Majumbar passes by

of certain texts from the writings of an earlier Althusser vitally interested in the Hegel whom he rejected later: 'The International of Decent Feelings',[10] 'A Matter of Fact',[11] 'On Conjugal Obscenity',[12] the theological moments of his thesis on Hegel[13] and his letter to Jean Lacroix.[14] Written between 1946 and 1951, while he was in the process of joining the Communist Party, the first was written for and rejected by the Catholic journal *Cahiers de notre jeunesse*, the second appeared as the opening essay in the tenth *Cahier* of the religious community *Jeunesse de l'Église*, with which he stayed in close touch, 'On Conjugal Obscenity' remained unpublished until after his death in the first volume of *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*,[15] both the thesis on Hegel's philosophy and the letter to Lacroix were also unpublished until this 1994 collection.

In this strange Althusser we find a critic comfortable with both theological arguments and questions of ecclesiology, working through instead of finding various ways to reject theology and the Church. If the thesis on Hegel and 'The International of Decent Feelings' are unabashedly theological, then 'A Matter of Fact' and 'On Conjugal Obscenity' fall clearly into ecclesiology. What interests me most is the nature of the writings themselves, especially the concerns revealed by slips and breaks in his arguments. For it seems to me that the forerunners of Althusser's dealings with religion may be found in these early theological essays.

Thus, at various points in the Masters thesis, he tracks the way Hegel's dialectic begins its work in his early theological texts, especially the *Theologische Jugendschriften*.[16] What takes me in is less the concern with Hegel himself than the ease with which Althusser slips into theology. Permit me the indulgence of one extended example of Althusser's argument concerning theology and Hegel: both a major step in the development of the dialectic and the necessary logical step to Kant and the notion of self-consciousness, Althusser

---

this phase with embarrassed brevity, preferring to begin with the moment he joined the PCF. Majumbar 1995.

[10] Althusser 1997, pp. 185–96; Althusser 1994a, pp. 261–75.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Althusser 1997, pp. 231–40; Althusser 1994a, pp. 327–39.

[13] Althusser 1997, pp. 36–169; Althusser 1994a, pp. 59–238.

[14] Althusser 1997, pp. 197–230; Althusser 1994a, pp. 277–325.

[15] Althusser 1994a.

[16] See the translation of *Theologische Jugendschriften* in Hegel 1971. Other parts appear in Hegel 1984.

picks up Hegel on Christology. For Althusser, Hegel saw a lost unity and harmony in the Greek world, where religion was an immanent exercise of life without the transcendence of revelation. Christ destroys this world, coming from the Father on high with a transcendent truth and then returning to it. The texts in the New Testament in which Christ comes to separate, set each against the other, to bring the sword and not peace, give voice to Christianity's otherworldly destruction of the Greek world. Yet, the positive content of Christianity will not be lost so easily: 'At stake is an attempt to recover the meaning of authentic positivity, to recover, that is, the practical uses of the content of revelation and its concrete implications for the conduct of action'.[17] Althusser is, of course, interested in the question of content in Hegel's work, and he finds in Hegel a move that would become characteristic of his thought: Christ may have destroyed Greek harmony, but he brought reconciliation to the hopelessly fragmented Jewish people. The eye of a hostile God, looking upon Abraham from an empty sky while he tracks across an empty desert with his herd, becomes the symbol of this fragmentation, the absolute separation from God in an unbridgeable transcendence. In this context, Christ's incarnation is the way such a disconnection is overcome. The Law is infused with love: Christ fulfils the Law. Hegel thereby reads Romans 10: 4 – 'For Christ is the *telos* of the Law, that everyone who has faith may be justified'[18] – in terms of *Aufhebung*, the great reconciliation effected through love. The dialectic continues to spin its way forward – Christ's reconciliation fails in a bad positivity (he returns to the Father), which works itself out in the shift of Jewish consciousness from objective to subjective dismemberment in the Christian community and becomes the basis of a stinging criticism of contemporary Christianity's sect-like behaviour – so that Hegel can get himself to Kant and the consciousness of subjectivity. What we get, in other words, is the transition by means of Christianity from consciousness to self-consciousness, and, in a case of the grand narrative of history writ small for Hegel's own intellectual development, the necessary stage that gets him to Kant.[19]

---

[17] Althusser 1997, p. 47: Althusser 1994a, p. 75.

[18] Althusser misreads the Greek text here, stating in the footnote (Althusser 1997, p. 158, n. 28; Althusser 1994a, p. 220, n. 28) that *Aufhebung* translates the Greek *pleroma*, rather than *telos*.

[19] 'This kind of phenomenological development of the religious meditations of Hegel's youth thus leads up to a sort of transition from consciousness to self-

Althusser would always return to Hegel, although hardly in the same mood, but this example at least shows someone quite at home with theological arguments. I too will return to Hegel later, in the section where I argue that the logic of Althusser's argument regarding Hegel in his later work leads to a reconsideration of religion.

The more interesting and most explicitly theological text – I take 'theology' in its purest sense, the reflection and deliberation on God – is 'The International of Decent Feelings'.[20] Already the boldness and lucidity of Althusser's arguments appear in this text, except that they produce a curious estrangement effect. In this text, as well as in 'A Matter of Fact' and 'On Conjugal Obscenity', we find both Christian and communist criticisms. Although both critiques come at the problems with which he deals from very different directions, Althusser brings them together in an alliance that could not last. Yet, the alliance between Christianity and communism enacts a slippage from one to the other, and this slide will enable the development of theological positions that become characteristic of his later Marxist arguments when the allegiance to the Church had passed.

Thus, in 'The International of Decent Feelings', intended for the journal edited by his friend François Ricci (one of those who was to join the Communist Party), Althusser polemicises against the apocalyptic habit of reading for the 'signs of the times' in World War Two and the Cold War. The War itself becomes both sin and God's wrathful punishment, the concentration camps are the Last Judgement, the Moscow trials are the Passion, the atomic bomb is the will of God, and the equality of death before the bomb is equivalent to equality before God.

Such a messy leakage of terms runs in two directions for Althusser. First, this apocalyptic commingling of theological categories with historical events – to be found as much in writers like Camus as the Catholics Marcel, Mauriac and Bossuet – leads to the popular postwar notions of the 'proletariat of fear' and the 'proletariat of the human condition'. Against these slogans Althusser lines up both political and theological criticisms. As for the former, such a

---

consciousness; it prefigures the analyses of the Phenomenology. We set out from the void of consciousness that manifested itself first as a lost plenitude, and subsequently as the engendering of plenitude; it has finally revealed itself to be the essence of consciousness. This new-found consciousness of subjectivity as such has a name in contemporary thought: Kant' (Althusser 1997, p. 51; Althusser 1994a, p. 81).

[20] Althusser 1997, pp. 21–35; Althusser 1994a, pp. 35–57.

generalising of class difference, taking up the term proletariat in order to speak of humanity as a whole, serves to deny the specific political content of the proletariat. For the proletariat, the threat of war or atomic bomb does not change the exploitation and poverty of their everyday lives. Later in the essay the specifically Marxist nature of his analysis comes to the fore: 'This reconciliation [of man with his destiny] presupposes a transition from capitalism to socialism by way of the emancipation of the labouring proletariat, which can, through this act, rid not only itself, but also all humanity of contradiction, delivering it, moreover, from the apocalyptic panic besetting it'.[21] Not long before he joined the Communist Party, Althusser sees the possibilities of hope with the proletariat and not some ideological shift that would efface the proletariat by fiat.

This emerging Marxist argument differs from his theological assessment, although we need to read carefully in order not to be sucked up into Althusser's own blending of theology and politics. First, the two texts:

> Fear is not a fatherland, nor is courage…; more, *the human condition is not a human fatherland*. It is, perhaps, the fatherland of men as they appear to God; because we are Christians, we call this condition original sin. For the man who is not a Christian, and for the Christian who does not usurp God's place, the human fatherland is not the proletariat of the human condition, it is the proletariat *tout court*, leading the whole of humanity towards its emancipation. This proletariat has a real content.[22]

> For, as Christians, we believe that there is a human condition; in other words, we believe in the equality of all men before God, and his Judgement, *but we do not want the Judgement of God to be spirited away before our very eyes; nor do we want to see non-Christians and, occasionally, Christians as well, commit the sacrilege of taking the atomic bomb for the will of God, equality before death for equality before God…, and the tortures of the concentration camps for the Last Judgement*.[23]

What interests me here is the shuffle between Christians and non-Christians and the way certain alliances are set up. Thus, in the first quotation, 'because

---

[21] Althusser 1997, p. 31; Althusser 1994a, p. 49.
[22] Althusser 1997, p. 27; Althusser 1994a, pp. 42–3.
[23] Althusser 1997, p. 27; italics in original; Althusser 1994a, p. 43.

we are Christians [*parce que nous sommes chrétiens*]'[24] moves to 'for the man who is not a Christian, and for the Christian who does not usurp God's place [*Pour l'homme non chrétien et pour le chrétien qui n'usurpe pas la place de Dieu*]'.[25] Similarly, in the second, 'as Christians [*comme chrétiens*]'[26] steps on to speak of 'non-Christians and, occasionally, Christians as well [*non-chrétiens et de chrétiens parfois*]'.[27] The shift is ingenious, for it appears at first that Althusser aligns himself with the generic group Christians – 'we are Christians' and 'as Christians' – and that the theological position he mentions applies to him as well as to one of these Christians. But Christianity is hardly uniform at any point, even if one allows for the unconscious Catholic assumption that Catholicism *is* Christianity, and so the qualifier appears: the Christians with whom he is really concerned are those who do not usurp God's place or who occasionally side with non-believers. The distinguishing feature of these Christians, the ones who do not clamber up God's footstool, is their allegiance with non-Christians.

Yet, there is a difference between the two quotations: for the first, the allegiance is positive, whereas, in the second, it is negative. In the second, the non-Christian and odd Christian find themselves duped by the apocalyptic reading of the signs of the times, a sacrilege Althusser and his fellow Christians – 'we' – would rather they avoid. In the first quotation, the Christian who does not attempt to lord it over others and the one who is not a Christian know the Marxist truth that the proletariat is not a generic description of the whole human condition but has a specific, distinctly salvific, content.

And it is this positive connection that intrigues me in light of Althusser's later absolute rejection of Christianity and the Church. At the time of this text (1947), he is still quite orthodox, holding to doctrines such as original sin and the Last Judgement. But Althusser sidesteps what is a very different – theological – criticism of the notion of the 'proletariat of fear' in his desire to form an alliance with 'non-Christians'. What we would expect to be a major difference with the early Marxist analysis in terms of class – that the human condition is one of original sin and the equality of all before God's judgement, which itself runs in a different direction from class analysis – falls into the background of

---

[24] Althusser 1994a, p. 42.
[25] Althusser 1994a, pp. 42–3.
[26] Althusser 1994a, p. 43.
[27] Ibid.

the desired allegiance. Instead, non-Christians, whom we can now read as a code for Marxists and the Communist Party, and Christians who leave God in charge, *agree* with each other concerning the specific class dimensions of the proletariat. It would not be long before Althusser had slipped from the ranks of Christians to the Communists, and the tough coalition he attempts to hold in this essay fell away. But not before he at least made the attempt to render the step as small as possible. With hindsight, he would argue that the effort of Catholic Action to connect Christian doctrines and political action constituted the mystification of politics and the dilution of Christian doctrines. Not in this essay.

He will not give ground to the non-Christians just yet, for, later in the essay, the criticisms are more clearly Christian, and, although he wants to see continuity between his own Christian position and Marxism, he cannot avoid a particular tension. The hint comes earlier, when, in the midst of noting the string of theological identifications of recent events, he notes with dismay that 'no-one is more vulnerable to blackmail based on this confusion of terms than Christians'.[28] And the specific Christian position he invokes against such 'a perversion of religion'[29] – a perversion that smacks too much of the German Churches' efforts to overcome their support of Hitler during the War – is the critique of idolatry. In Adorno's hands, such a criticism would take the form of the *Bilderverbot* or ban on images drawn from the second commandment of Exodus 20/Deuteronomy 5.

For Althusser, idolatry is specifically Christian: he takes the important phrase 'for the Christian who does not usurp God's place'[30] in terms of the New-Testament warnings against false prophets. The apocalyptic warnings of Mark 13 (especially verse 22) and Matthew 24/Luke 21 become, for Althusser, a paradoxical sign, the false prophets themselves being a mark of the Last Days although they themselves are false precisely because they predict the long awaited End:

> *This false end of the world is teeming with false prophets* [the prime examples of which are Camus and Malraux] *who announce false Christs and treat an*

[28] Althusser 1997, p. 27; Althusser 1994a, p. 43.
[29] Althusser 1997, p. 29; Althusser 1994a, p. 46.
[30] Althusser 1997, p. 27; Althusser 1994a, p. 43.

> *event as the Advent*. But Christ has taught us[31] that we must beware of false prophets, and also that they will reappear as the Last Days draw nigh. The paradox is plain: the end that is close for every Christian is not the end of the false prophets of history.[32]

A final twist awaits us, for although the criticism of idolatry may take the particular New-Testament form of the warning against false prophets in the Last Days, the problem with idolatry is not that one becomes too connected to the representation of the deity, deluded into thinking that this is in fact God. Rather, the ultimate problem is that one replaces God with another, elevating the various idols in his place. And the New Testament's take on this thread of idolatry is that such replacements are human beings themselves. Alluding to Matthew 7: 21 – 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven' – Althusser argues that the ultimate form of idolatry is the elevation of oneself in God's place: '*When we merely invoke the Lord, we serve, not the Lord we invoke, but another whom we do not*'.[33] This is where the various gestures from the European Churches – Koestler's sermon to the European Left, Malraux on the Western bloc as protection against both the USA and the USSR and Mauriac's vote of confidence in Léon Blum – become the marks of false prophets (Matthew 7: 15).

If Althusser were to stick to this Christian line of thought, then he would rule out precisely the move he does make, which is to argue that these false prophets do not see the real problem, namely the exploitation of the proletariat under capitalism. The truth that these false prophets miss is the nature of socialism. They seek 'socialism without class struggle', 'a verbal, moralizing socialism',[34] socialism in politics but none in government. But, in identifying the truth of socialism, the proletariat and class struggle, is not Althusser playing precisely the same game as those whom he criticises? He puts this for-

---

[31] 'And then is anyone says to you, "Look, here is the Christ!" or "Look, there he is!" do not believe it. False Christs and false prophets will arise, and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take heed, I have told you all things beforehand' (Mark 13: 21–3). Matthew has the same, with minor variations, although with the following addition: 'So, if they say to you, "Lo, he is the wilderness," do not go out; if they say to you "Lo, he is in the inner rooms," do not believe it' (Matthew 24: 26).

[32] Althusser 1997, p. 28; Althusser 1994a, p. 44.

[33] Althusser 1997, p. 30; Althusser 1994a, p. 47.

[34] Althusser 1997, p. 30; Althusser 1994a, p. 48.

ward as a properly Christian position free from idolatry, but, from a Christian angle, the laying of hope at the feet of the proletariat is the type of idolatry that would enlist him with the false prophets, no matter how much he might see himself as a true prophet. For his later Marxism, it would be God himself who would become the mystifying, idolatrous figure that obfuscates the class struggle itself.

I have paused with this essay on decent feelings for more reasons than the argument itself, or indeed for the signs of the tension between and Althusser's transition from the Catholic Church to the Communist Party. For there are two other remarkable things about this essay: to begin with, he assumes and believes central Christian doctrines such as original sin, incarnation and Last Judgement. Unlike Bloch, Benjamin, Adorno or Gramsci, he ranks himself with believers. Further, a certain blind spot shows up in this essay, one that turns on the ambiguity of the word 'catholic'. The word covers a range of overlayed meanings, from the specificity of the French Roman-Catholic Church all the way to Christians in general. But Althusser is guilty all too often of universalising and thereby concealing the specific situation of the French Roman-Catholic Church. Of course, such a move is endemic to the term 'catholic' itself, but I will continue to call him on this, since it is a slide he would repeat in his Communist years.

In 'A Matter of Fact',[35] an explicitly ecclesiological essay, all of the assumptions concerning catholicity play themselves out. Published in a *Cahier* entitled 'The Captive Gospel' by *Jeunesse de l'Église* three months after he joined the Communist Party in November 1948, the theme of the collection of essays was 'Has the Good News been announced to the men of our day'? In almost point-form style, Althusser argues that the question points to the woeful state of that 'sick man', the Church. And his basic argument concerns the historical disjunction of the Church: since it hangs, socially, ideologically and politically, on to feudal and capitalist structures, its own structures are 'alien [*étrangères*] to our times'.[36] In short, the Church remains tied to a social and economic world without which it cannot imagine its existence, God himself being 'a prisoner of a conceptual universe that no longer makes sense to the men of

[35] Althusser 1997, pp. 185–96; Althusser 1994a, pp. 261–75.

[36] Althusser 1997, p. 186, Althusser 1994a, p. 263; see the detail in Althusser 1997, pp. 187–93; Althusser 1994a, pp. 263–72.

our times'.[37] All of which forces the Church to defend reactionary political positions in order to shore up the obsolete world-views and structures in which it finds itself imbricated.

The solution? Quite simply the emancipation of the Church from feudal and capitalist structures that will then lead to a re-appropriation of an authentic religious life. If the external liberation of the Church requires an alliance with the world-changing force of the proletariat, then the reclamation of religious life must happen through the far-flung radical cells within the Church – such as 'Youth of the Church' or what later became the base communities of the Roman-Catholic Church in Latin America (Althusser would keep track of liberation theology with great interest). Althusser is even more explicit than in 'The International of Decent Feelings' on the need for an emancipatory Christian-proletariat alliance. In other words, the Church's hope lies with the proletariat, which now arrives en masse in Althusser's text. And, in this world-historical movement, the Christian, now clearly in the singular, must play an active part. Although the uneasy alliance is still very much part of the agenda, there is a distinct shift from the earlier essay, for in 'A Matter of Fact' the weight shifts decisively to the proletariat: they possess the means for overcoming the social and economic conditions of the Church's woeful state, and the only viable option for the (socially progressive) Christian is to join.

I want to focus on a few things in 'A Matter of Fact', namely, the shift to speaking of theology as ideology, the possibility that Christianity (and by extension religion *per se*) is not necessarily alienating, and the pervasive assumption of catholicity. Let me pick up the second issue first. Still tied to a theory of alienation, one that in this case arises through being tied to feudal and capitalist structures, Althusser can still hold out for a transformed Church. And so we find extraordinary statements, at least in light of the well-known later Althusser: 'The Church will live thanks to those who, through struggle and in struggle, are once again discovering that the Word was born among men and dwelt among them – and who are already preparing a humane place for it amongst men'.[38] Not *a priori* reactionary, nor even alienating, the Church may take on a hitherto unforeseen, unalienated, form that will be appropriate for communist society: 'If religion is not, *a priori*, a form of alienation, this

[37] Althusser 1997, p. 188; Althusser 1994a, p. 264.
[38] Althusser 1997, p. 195; Althusser 1994a, p. 275.

reduction should permit the Christian to reconquer an authentic religious life, whose conditions and limits he must already begin to define, in struggle'.[39] Here, he struggles with Marx's early argument that religion is the mark of social and economic alienation and would disappear when those real conditions have been alleviated. Later, he will abandon such a position, becoming more conventionally Marxist, and the Church will become an ideological state apparatus, but not before the curious transposition into the argument for the eternal nature of ideology.

On the question of theology and ideology – the first issue I noted above – there are already signs of the shifts that were to come. Thus, in an intriguing paragraph,[40] he maintains a distinction between ideology and theology that makes the latter a subset of the former. Theology, or at least Roman-Catholic theology, bases itself on an obsolete complex of Thomistic and/or Augustinian philosophies, which themselves rely upon Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical systems. This system, which is able to deal with problems by playing off Aquinas with Augustine, informs the Church's economic, moral, political, educational and, above all, theological ways of thinking; in short, Truth (Revelation) is possible for the Church only in these terms. The easy move for Althusser would be to argue – and this is how his essay tends – that this whole system is dead on its feet, awaiting the slightest push to send it sprawling. But what interests him is the fact that 'it must plainly have moorings in life in order to persist even as an illusion',[41] and those moorings [*attaches*] are none other than the very real leftovers of a medieval world. At this point, the complexity of Althusser's notion of ideology already begins to show itself: the medieval structures that lie at the heart of the Church foster and enable people within the Church to hold to an outmoded ideological formation, but those structures only continue to exist because the ideology keeps the structures in place. Using the example of natural law, Althusser argues that this and other concepts are 'sustained by concrete structures that are still "lived" by many of the men of our day, who need these concepts, precisely, in order to legitimize, defend, and perpetuate the structures in which they are born, grow up, and die'.[42] Much of this will return in his famous essay on ideological state

---

[39] Althusser 1997, pp. 194–5; Althusser 1994a, p. 274.
[40] Althusser 1997, pp. 188–9; Althusser 1994a, pp. 265–6.
[41] Althusser 1997, p. 188; Althusser 1994a, p. 265.
[42] Althusser 1997, p. 189; Althusser 1994a, p. 266.

apparatuses, including the fundamentally medieval nature of the Church, in which context it was the dominant state apparatus, as well as the complex dialectic of ideology itself. What has happened in 'A Matter of Fact', however, is the linking of theology with ideology that will ultimately be to the former's detriment. Yet it does not pass without leaving a distinct brand upon Althusser's theory of ideology, as I will argue below.

The third issue is Althusser's catholic blind spot, which I have already tracked in 'The International of Decent Feelings'. Apart from the obvious singular capital *l'Église* that betrays an assumed united body, Althusser's language betrays the blind spot time and again. He writes of 'the immense world of the Church',[43] 'policies on a global scale',[44] the global struggle of capitalism and socialism in which the Church has a 'deep, compromising commitment to world-wide reaction'.[45] But let me take one passage at the opening of the essay as the most sustained example:

> To begin with, the question [regarding the Good News] takes a *universal form*. On the one hand, *the world* no longer listens to *the Church*, whose words fail to reach *the men of our day*; the Church has become a virtual stranger for *broad masses of people* who are already *the present and future of this world*. On the other hand, when we consider the people faithful to the Church, the question arises as to whether their faithfulness is still religious. This historical situation is simultaneously the historical context Christians are living in, and a reality *all men*, Christians or not, meet at every turn'.[46]

Althusser writes not so much about a global question – 'universal form', 'all men' – but gives the ground of debate to the institution in question. Not only is there a singular Christianity for which 'Church' acts as cipher, but its problems are also global problems. The specificity of the Church in question bursts out in a sentence where he lists the parts of the church needing reform – 'the Church's conceptual universe, theology, and moral system, its theory of the family, of education, of Catholic action, of the parish, etc.'[47] These are, of course, peculiarly Roman-Catholic domains. But I want to sug-

---

[43] Althusser 1997, p. 195; Althusser 1994a, p. 275.
[44] Althusser 1997, p. 191; Althusser 1994a, p. 269.
[45] Althusser 1997, p. 191; Althusser 1994a, p. 269.
[46] Althusser 1997, p. 186; Althusser 1994a, p. 262, italics mine.
[47] Althusser 1997, p. 194; Althusser 1994a, p. 274.

gest that precisely such a blindness to the specificity of the (French) Roman-Catholic Church renders Althusser a 'catholic' philosopher, especially in this his explicit ecclesiological essay. The catch is that such a catholicity emerges when he is taking on the institution itself, absorbing the very assumptions that steal away the force of his arguments. For, in this essay and the others from the same period, the effort at alliance between Marxism and the Roman-Catholic Church leaves open the passage that enables a nocturnal border crossing from one to the other, bearing smuggled goods that he will keep with him.

Yet Althusser will not let me make this argument concerning his catholic blind spot easily. Just when it looks as though I can trace a consistent blockage to the specificity of the French Roman-Catholic Church and his tendency to universalise in a catholic fashion, the penultimate essay of this early period – the extraordinary 'On Conjugal Obscenity',[48] which he saw as a contribution to 'the women's movement and, secondarily, "feminism"'[49] – shows an Althusser very much aware of this specificity. I am going to suggest that there is a difference between negative and positive criticisms of the Church in these texts, a tendency to become specific when he is excoriating the Church and universal when he sees something valuable. But, first, the argument of the essay itself: here, he tracks the hypocrisy of the public theology of marriage in the French Roman-Catholic Church.

The refurbishing, from the 1930s, of the sacrament of marriage that is the subject of 'On Conjugal Obscenity' dragged marriage and sex out of the dark and whispered domains of the domestic zone and placed them squarely in the public arena. Sex became a sacrament that the couple administered (!) to each other, no longer merely for procreation but for mutual pleasure. Couples would proclaim that they were Christian, married, sexual beings and not afraid to talk about it openly – an 'aggressive exhibitionism'[50] that condemned non-religious forms of marriage.

This is a distinctly ecclesiological essay, since Althusser is concerned with the state of the Roman-Catholic Church in French society. He argues that the various new directions of the Church in France, brought together under the

---

[48] Althusser 1997, pp. 231–40; Althusser 1994a, pp. 327–39.

[49] Althusser commenting on the essay much later in 1978, quoted by Matheron 1997, p. 19.

[50] Althusser 1997, p. 233; Althusser 1994a, p. 331.

umbrella of Action Catholique, whether agricultural, urban, youth, students, workers, managers, bosses, married couples, were part of the tradition of a disestablished Church. Without the political influence of the established churches of Spain or Italy (he limits his examples yet again to Roman-Catholic Churches, neglecting the established Protestant Churches of England, Germany or the Netherlands), the French Church compensated for its lack of state power by developing a voluntary spiritual tradition. Whereas before Catholic Action this was largely passive and parish-based, Catholic Action itself enrolled large numbers of the faithful in active involvement in various arms of the Church. So the public movement of the sacrament of marriage must be read as part of this larger dialectic of French social life. Again, we find an argument as much indebted to Marxism as Roman-Catholic thought, deeply political and sociological but still focused on the Church.

But that focus is increasingly critical. Even though Althusser was interested in fringe groups of the Catholic Left (he calls upon such groups in 'A Matter of Fact' to join with communists and proletariat to effect change in Church and society), in 'On Conjugal Obscenity', one of these groups comes in for unrelenting criticism. The problem with the open valorisation of marriage and sex is that it also valued large broods of children and domesticity. Althusser is no prude: the 'obscenity' in question was not the public nature of the movement, nor even the sexual-spiritual conjunction, but the way its apparent radical edge reinforced reactionary Roman-Catholic positions on marriage. The bearing and raising of children is no longer a *duty* of Roman-Catholic families; it now becomes a *celebration* in the public sacrament of marriage. And so women, who had begun to have other options open to them, found themselves tied to the long labour of pregnancy, birth and care for endless numbers of offspring, precisely through an ideology of sexual and spiritual equality. A glimpse of liberation, now channelled into the public affront (for traditional Catholics) of the sacramentalisation of sex, folds back to reinforce the most reactionary of Catholic positions on the family, except that now the women in question did so in the misguided belief that theirs was a radical path. In other words, through what seemed to be a new departure for women, in which there was, for the first time within the Church, a spiritual and sexual equality with men, the oppression and subjugation of women that is intrinsic to the Church itself showed itself in a new guise. If Althusser holds out the theoretical possibility that the movement may have run a different course that did not render the

women Christian mothers and homemakers, there was precious little of that possibility in the movement itself. In the end, the effort to shift sexuality from secrecy to aggressive publicity merely brought into the open the Church's own reactionary agenda. For Althusser the apparent experience of emancipation was nothing more than a new form of servitude, a classic and serious form of mystification. The Church still holds sway: 'the power that lifted the interdict is the one that established it: the authority that makes the laws can also unmake them'.[51]

At first sight, Althusser seems to have pulled the log out of his own eye, able to regard clearly the particular features of the French Roman-Catholic Church that set it apart from others, such as those in Italy and Spain. The blind spot has apparently gone. But there is a difference between the 'Conjugal' essay and the others I have pondered: in the earlier pieces, there was something that Althusser wished to retrieve from the Roman-Catholic Church, whether specific doctrines or an allegiance between the bits and pieces of the Catholic Left and Marxism. And, in these essays, the catholic blind spot comes into play, the tendency to universalise an unacknowledged feature of the institution itself. However, with 'On Conjugal Obscenity', he identifies a virulent form of mystification and alienation in the French Roman-Catholic Church. Only when he finds nothing retrievable about a certain aspect of the Church can he become specific.

And, yet, he is still within the Church. If 'On Conjugal Obscenity' shows an increasingly critical Althusser, a gradual crumbling of his belief that the Church may be open to reform, his primary focus remains the Church and its problems. All of this would finally unravel in the long, legendary letter to Jean Lacroix, a former teacher. In dealing critically with the relation between Catholicism and Marxism, largely in favour of the latter, the letter to Lacroix marks the dissolution of the alliance he had sought until this point and the end of his commitment to the Church. Mainly a response to Lacroix's book, *Marxisme, existentialisme, personnalisme*,[52] the parts that interest me come towards the close.[53] Here, Althusser responds to Lacroix's criticisms of the

[51] Althusser 1997, p. 239; Althusser 1994a, p. 338.
[52] Lacroix 1950.
[53] Althusser 1997, pp. 211–20; Althusser 1994a, pp. 295–308.

'theological' dimensions of Marxism – (divine) judgement, history and eternity, transcendence, and truth.

As for historical judgement and the judgement of history, Althusser takes exception to the criticism of Marxism as a theodicy that judges history in terms of a transhistorical ideal. Lacroix's criticism boils down to the argument that Marxism is inescapably theological, but that its theology is incorrect. And this is because Marxists delude themselves: they think they are offering an immanent judgement of history, but, in fact, they make transcendent judgements. In doing so, they usurp God's place since he has now been banished from existence. In response to Lacroix's accusations, Althusser responds by arguing that the only transcendent horizon recognised by Marxists is history itself, that any judgement is immanent to history which thereby renders it transcendent: 'We remain *within history*. Let God, if he exists and if he so desires, damn or save Hitler; that is not our affair'.[54] What happens in this response to Lacroix is the gradual severing of the strands that tie Marxism and theology to one another, for Althusser ends up with no possible connection between the two on the crucial question of history.

On the question of time and eternity, he is content to prise open the tensions of Lacroix's implicitly theological argument. I do not want to pursue the details of this argument – the problem with eternity as the act of understanding and mastering time (would one need to understand the significance of eternity before mastering it?), the non-significance of any concrete concept of eternity (it does not add anything)[55] – save to emphasise Althusser's insistence that Lacroix stop whitewashing his theological arguments with philosophy, the absurd core of theology with reason. Recognise the absolute transcendence of that which you worship, says Althusser:

> …this transcendent entity has a content you aspire to and cherish with all the force of your soul – and I am convinced you cherish it – but a content so 'transcendent' that, strictly speaking, you cannot but be ignorant of it; *not even your aspiration and your spiritual quest can be the sign and the guarantee of the content you aspire to*… so that one can see that *this aspiration is not even*

[54] Althusser 1997, p. 214; Althusser 1994a, p. 299.

[55] 'To dub man's understanding of time 'eternity' is to change the name of a street without changing wither its location or the people who live on it; it is a petty postal reform and a minor municipal ceremony' (Althusser 1997, p. 215; Althusser 1994a, p. 301).

> *proof of itself and that this eternity is the annihilation of all meaning, beginning with its own*, and the condition of absolute absurdity (or rather, not even that, for absurdity still has a meaning, whatever you say).[56]

Theology, and especially the object of its reflection, God, seems to have departed the universe without even a wisp of rocket smoke to mark his passing. Is this text yet another sign of Althusser's parting with theology? On one level, it is, but, at another extraordinary level, Althusser would like Lacroix to be a better theologian. In all his efforts to render 'eternity' a viable philosophical concept, Lacroix has failed to register the absolute otherness of God. Only such a radical transcendence suits a notion like eternity, except that Lacroix should name what he avoids naming.

Yet the point regarding transcendence is not the end of Althusser's objections, for any half-decent theologian knows that transcendence is neither the foundation (Lacroix's position) nor the result of immanence. Rather, one cannot exist without the other. And so Althusser calls on Lacroix to render justice to immanence:

> Or, again, this transcendent entity has an assignable content, i.e., you think there must exist values which explain history, which are history's inner law, at once present within it and governing it, but in that case say so, name them, and *confront them with the history* they are part of, seriously, honestly, without sheltering behind an eternity which is supposedly a *'presence'* in time, and that which 'constitutes' history; 'incarnate them' if need be.…[57]

The allusion to Christology is hardly accidental, for in theology the centre of the paradox of transcendence and immanence hinges on the figure of Christ, God inexplicably incarnated as 'man'. I want to suggest that Althusser shows up as the better theologian of the two: if Lacroix is going to make theological points, then he should make a clean breast of it and say so.

Although Althusser's reprimand seeps with the nostalgia for a decent theological argument, it is not something he sees himself doing. Rather, a proper demarcation of theology and philosophy, like that between political science and theology in Montesquieu's work,[58] enables him to leave theology

---

[56] Althusser 1997, p. 216; Althusser 1994a, p. 302.
[57] Althusser 1997, p. 216; Althusser 1994a, p. 303.
[58] See Althusser 1972, pp. 21–2; Althusser 1959, pp. 10–11.

behind, although he walks on slowly, trying not to look back. Philosophy then becomes the explication of the truths provided by the proletariat, or, as he later famously put it, class struggle in theory. He no longer wants a blending of the two that he finds in Lacroix's work, although this is exactly the alliance he had himself sought not so long ago.[59]

In the breakdown of the alliance on which he was so keen in 'The International of Decent Feelings' and 'A Matter of Fact', Althusser has taken two different tacks thus far: the impossible tensions between Marxism and theology, and the demarcation of theology and philosophy. He will make one more, drawn from the question of class, to argue that Lacroix's positions – 'a history "other" than the one actually experienced by men, to "spiritual significance," to divine judgement, or to concepts shrouded in mystery'[60] – are none other than those used by philosophers and kings to justify injustice. In others words, Althusser invokes the standard Marxist argument of mystification, that the language of religion and theology is nothing but a justification for oppression and hence a signal of alienation. But what interests me here is the biblical quotation used against Lacroix: 'Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone' (Matthew 7: 9). The biblical text becomes, in Althusser's hands, a critique of Lacroix's theological mystifications: 'Can we give stones to those who give us bread?' Not the first time he has done this,[61] the ambiguity of Althusser's move here is inescapable: the Bible against the quasi-theological arguments of philosophers and kings. But then, as I have argued in my discussions of Bloch and Benjamin, the Bible and theology are hardly comfortable companions.

In the long process of the collapse of the alliance between communists and progressive Christians, particularly the groups of the Catholic Left, Althusser signals to his former teacher the 'catholic' paradox of his own move:

> …in *actively* rallying to the working class, we have not only not repudiated what had been our reasons for living, but have liberated them by fully realising them. I think we deserve our future, even from Wilde's point of view, in that *we have not disregarded our past*: we have watched our past

[59] See Althusser 1997, p. 206; Althusser 1994a, p. 288.
[60] Althusser 1997, p. 218; Althusser 1994a, p. 305.
[61] 'As for eternity, no man hath seen it but the Son, as St. John says' (Althusser 1997, p. 214; Althusser 1994a, p. 300); 'No man hath seen God, says John' (Althusser 1997, p. 216; Althusser 1994a, p. 302).

> grow inside us and bear fruit in a manner beyond the hopes of our youth. The Christian I once was has in no way abjured his Christian 'values', but now I live them (this is an… 'historical', not a divine judgement!), whereas earlier I aspired to live them.[62]

Obviously, this marks a decisive moment in the long transition from Christian to Marxist commitment, and I am not the first to make the point. However, there is more going on here. For this longer 'confession' spins out the curious use of the gospel of Matthew against the theologian Lacroix: it seems to me that, despite himself, Althusser provides us with an unwitting recognition of his own inescapable catholicism. And he does so by means of the blind spot I have been tracking in these early writings. The 'values' of which he writes are those of love, hope and faith, the radical political and moral code of the Beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). The teleology rivals that of Bloch's argument for atheism as the logical outcome of the Bible and Christianity. But what Althusser's comments obscure is what is so persistent in his thought, namely the catholicism that remained after he had discarded both the epithet 'Roman' and the capital letter. I am suggesting, in other words, that what Althusser regards as the realisation of Christian 'values' in his communism, those that could not be realised when he was a Christian, include the Catholic context in which he imbibed. In fact, I want to go further than this: the notion of Christian 'values' is a sleight of hand for 'catholicism' itself.

From the thesis on Hegel to the letter to Lacroix, which I have characterised in terms of theological and ecclesiological writings, I have argued for the gradual collapse of the troubled alliance Althusser sought to establish between radical Catholicism and Marxism, the shift from someone comfortable with theological arguments to one highly critical, preferring to keep theology and philosophy in their own spheres, and the function of a certain blind spot in regard to catholicity. In the end, this catholicity interests me most. Not only does it continue in his work through the attempted and then abandoned alliance between Marxism and the Catholic Left, but catholicity leaves its mark in these early works precisely when he wishes to hold onto certain elements that he values from Catholicism. At these moments, the catholic blind

---

[62] Althusser 1997, p. 221; Althusser 1994a, pp. 308–9.

spot appears, when he assumes without acknowledgement that the particular Roman-Catholic issues of which he speaks are universal issues. The paradox of the blind spot shows up most sharply at the moment he explicitly recognises his departure from the Church. Or, rather, as he puts it, from his Christian faith: he could realise the Christian values he aspired to as a Christian only when he relinquished his commitment. The use of these terms, severed from their specific Roman-Catholic context and universalised as values and commitment, signals the pervasiveness of Althusser's catholicity.

From absent cause to philosophy of religion

> For if we examine the question closely, we shall come to realize that philosophy is satisfied neither with dominating the sciences nor with 'speaking' the truth of the sciences. Philosophy equally imposes its dominion over religion and morality, politics and aesthetics, and even economics.[63]

For one who had renounced faith and the Church, it is remarkable how often Althusser returns to what he calls 'religion'. But I do not want to take the lazy option and merely trace the continued presence of religion in his work. Rather, I am interested in how the materialist philosopher speaks of the possibility of 'a true *sociological theory of religious and moral beliefs*'?[64] Althusser, of course, writes this of his favoured Montesquieu, but I suspect that it also applies to himself. In other words, once he had rejected the Church and thrown in his lot with the Communists, his work gradually shifts ground: the repeated references to religion become, in the end, the groundwork for a philosophy of religion itself. I want to suggest that there are two logical stages in Althusser's reflections: the first is the process by which he gets to the point, despite himself, where one of the proper subjects of philosophy is religion; the second concerns the various elements of what he calls the 'practical ideology' of religion.

---

[63] Althusser 1990, p. 245.
[64] Althusser 1972, p. 23; Althusser 1959, p. 13.

The logical necessity

So what we find is an Althusser who makes a series of fascinating moves that bring him to the philosophical necessity of reflecting on what he calls religion: the notion that Marx's new science of History requires a new philosophy; the implications of his late engagement with Hegel via Lenin; the need for philosophy to mediate between science and ideology, and to reconsider practical ideologies such as religion; and the possible place of a theory of religion within proletarian ideology.

Let me begin with his famous argument that Marx opened up a decisively new moment in human thought. Althusser's metaphor is the 'continent', the new scientific theory, of history. He compares it to the 'continents' of mathematics, opened up by the Greeks in the fifth century BCE, and of physics by Galileo and then Newton.[65] The implications of such discoveries must follow his argument that each new science then produces a philosophy, the need to produce the categories adequate to the new science. In the same way that Plato and Greek philosophy follow the discovery of mathematics, and that of Descartes and Newton follows physics, so also Marxist philosophy can only emerge after the discovery of a scientific theory of history. This argument also accounts for the time lag in the emergence of a proper Marxist philosophy that Althusser implies begins in large part with him.

But there are wider implications than Althusser's preferred path of philosophy. He mentions in passing that the human and social sciences must also take into account Marx's discovery – economists, historians, sociologists, social psychologists, psychologists, linguists and psychoanalysts, historians of art and literature, and of *religious* and other ideologies. It is but a small point, but Marx's 'discovery' must, for Althusser, also have a bearing on religion, or, more specifically, religious ideology.

A second, more specifically logical move is tied to Hegel. Even though he professed a profound aversion to Hegel, or, rather, argued that the properly scientific Marx emerged only after he had finally shed his Hegelianism, Althusser can never quite excoriate Hegel entirely. For Lenin, after all, is

---

[65] See Althusser 1972, pp. 38–46; Althusser 1969c, pp. 23–32, and earlier Althusser 1972, pp. 39, in 1968, he leaves open the possibility that Freud himself opened up a new continent, but within a year seems to have given up this suggestion (Althusser 1972, p. 72).

fascinated with Hegel. And, if we thought that Althusser had put Hegel's theology behind him, then it is Lenin who permits him to return to that theology, now in the form of the philosophy of religion. Despite all his dislike for the Hegelian dialectic, he draws near to Adorno's contradictory critique of Kierkegaard, that is, he both rejects theology and reads it dialectically. Both sides of this response to Hegel's theology he finds in Lenin. Thus, Althusser quotes Lenin arguing that Hegel's criticism of Kant is correct: 'Kant disparages knowledge in order to make way for faith: Hegel exalts knowledge, asserting that knowledge is knowledge of God. The materialist exalts the knowledge of matter, of nature, consigning God, and the philosophical rabble that defends God, to the rubbish heap'.[66] It is perhaps stating the obvious that the trashing of theology is somewhat complete here.

But Lenin offers another possibility for Althusser. Apart from the point that the 'knowledge of God' is a necessary step to the 'knowledge of matter' (but only after reading *Capital*), Althusser explores Lenin's fascination with Hegel's discussion of the Absolute Idea in the last chapter of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. For here, ostensibly the characteristic Hegelian closure with God, Lenin finds the greatest possibilities for materialism in Hegel's thought. In other words, using Hegel's own dialectical method, the more idealistic he gets, the more materialistic he becomes.[67] As if this was not enough, Althusser's gives it a further twist: what we find in this section of the *Logic*, after having traced through Marx's own setting of Hegel on his feet, is that the Absolute Idea is none other than the process – History, Nature, Method etc. – without a subject (God). For, in Hegel's own writing, God seems strangely to disappear from this final part of the *Logic*, and Althusser's argument is that it took Marx to make this clear. In the end, what emerges is the process of History, whose science Marx inaugurated with a distinct method for understanding the process itself.

In other words, Hegel's theological argument has suffered the fate of his own method: while Althusser, following Lenin, rejects theology (a particular form of idealism) he is also taken with its dialectical inversion into materialism.

---

[66] Althusser 1972, p. 116. Quoting Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 38: p. 171. Also: 'I am in general trying to read Hegel materialistically: Hegel is materialism which has been stood on its head (according to Engels) – that is to say, I cast aside for the most part God, the Absolute, Pure Idea, etc.' (Lenin, *Collected Works* 38: p. 104, quoted in Althusser 1972, p. 115).

[67] See Althusser 1972, pp. 120–1.

Here, like Adorno, there is not only a contradiction within Althusser's work (the simultaneous rejection and use of theology, as well as the use of a dialectical argument that smacks a little too much of Hegel), but also the basis of an argument for a very different approach to theology from a materialist angle.

This might be enough, given Althusser's militant championing of the philosophical credentials of Lenin, but there is a further justification for the philosophical consideration of religion. And this comes in the midst of the famous lectures on 'Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists' from 1967, whose forbidding title might lead one to expect that we are on the terrain of hard science. Yet they are saturated with reflections on religion, particularly with two of Althusser's favoured distinctions – between science and ideology and then between ideology in general and practical ideologies. But what interests him is less the distinctions themselves than the task of philosophy in relation to them.

Thus, even though philosophy, which, for Althusser, is class struggle in theory, concerns itself with the revolutionary transformation of intellectual and social life, it is neither a science nor an ideology. However much Marx was responsible, as far as Althusser is concerned, for inaugurating the science of history, philosophy itself is not a science. Is it then some form of ideology? Again, the answer is negative, but what intrigues is how he manages to say no. Philosophy, he argues, does not seek to provide the answers to the old theological questions of destiny and origins, the ultimate ends and radical origins of human history. In other words, philosophy does not seek to take the place of theology or the church, even though it has traditionally done so. And the reason? These questions and disciplines are ideological propositions, the realm of moral and religious thought. Or more specifically, they are not ideology in general but *practical ideologies*, the various specific forms of ideology, those that characterise the dominant forms of behaviour in a particular social formation: '*Practical ideologies* are complex formations which shape notions-representations-images into behaviour-conduct-attitude-gestures. The ensemble functions as practical norms that govern the attitude and concrete positions men adopt towards the real objects and real problems of their social and individual existence, and towards their history'.[68]

[68] Althusser 1990, p. 83.

Note what has happened here: on the way to showing that philosophy is not ideology, he invokes the notion of practical ideologies. I will have more to say on this distinction in Althusser between ideology *per se* and practical ideologies below, but my point here is that, out of Althusser's argument, has emerged a workable category – the practical ideology of religion. Or, rather, religion is one of the practical ideologies. The introduction of the practical ideology of religion enables an extraordinary shift in his argument that I read as a positioning of philosophy so that it can speak of religion: 'Let us simply note this point: from now on, philosophy is defined by a double relation – to the sciences and to practical ideologies'.[69] Philosophy is neither a science, nor is it resolutely opposed to practical ideologies. Rather, it mediates between them, is constituted by the relation between them, and must therefore not only work out its place in relation to them, but also reflect upon their natures. In other words, one of the proper tasks of philosophy is the analysis of practical ideologies such as religion. At odd moments, he does indeed say as much: philosophy, as that which sees the whole, concerns all human ideas and practices, including religion, subjecting them to a radical philosophical form that decomposes and recomposes them in its own fashion.[70]

Elements of a materialist philosophy of religion

The Church, then, leaves a curious residue in Althusser's thought – something I have argued comes in the form of a logical opening for a philosophy of religion, or, rather, a philosophy of the practical ideology of religion. But that is really only the first step, for, after setting up the logical possibilities for an Althusserian philosophy of religion, there is a second stage that begins the work of shaping and fashioning the various elements of the practical ideology of religion. Not unexpectedly, that project hinges around the question of ideology, and my interest is the neglected final section of the ideological apparatus essay on religious interpellation. Further, I investigate an overgrown path to the strangest Althusser yet, namely, the materialist biblical critic. In other words I investigate two elements of a possible materialist philosophy: ideology and myth.

---

[69] Ibid.
[70] See Althusser 1990, pp. 245, 252.

Ideology

Apart from the historicising function of the 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' essay – in which the bourgeoisie gradually wrests ideological control from the Church and relocates it in education[71] – it provides some of the building blocks of a theory of religion. There are three elements: the argument that ideology is eternal; that ideology has a material existence; and the interpellation narrative. And, in each case, the catholicity of Althusser's thought – a distinct residue of his early abode within the Church – returns with extraordinary vengeance.

Already in the first steps of his argument regarding ideology, he effects what may be called a theological transition. I am referring to his controversial argument that ideology has no history, that it is eternal. This is part of his search for a theory of ideology in general, over against particular ideologies that are distinct from class. It is this general ideology, upon which particular, historical, ideologies depend, that has no history. Although he makes the effort to connect his argument with Freud's assumption of an eternal unconscious, the move is also theological, or rather an appropriation, with a twist, of theological arguments about God: 'If eternal means, not transcendent to all (temporal) history, but omnipresent, trans-historical and therefore immutable in form throughout the extent of history, I shall adopt Freud's expression word for word, and write *ideology is eternal*, exactly like the unconscious'.[72] I am less interested in the apparent polemic against the Marxist desideratum that history is the ultimate category of any analysis, but in the appropriation of what is primarily a theological argument concerning God. The implicit logic of such an appropriation is not the smuggling in of theology but the realisation of an internal logic about theology itself: deliberations on the

[71] 'It is no accident that all ideological struggle, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, starting with the first shocks of the Reformation, was concentrated in an anti-clerical and anti-religious struggle; rather this is the function precisely of the dominant position of the religious ideological State apparatus' (Althusser 1972, p. 151). The process he describes of the attack on the Church, the reduction of its power, dissolution of its functions after the French Revolution, and replacement with another dominant ISA implicitly takes on a positive role in his analysis. This struggle was not merely the result of a gripe against the Church, but necessary for the political hegemony of the bourgeoisie as well as the 'ideological hegemony indispensable to the reproduction of capitalist relations of production' (Althusser 1972, p. 152).

[72] Althusser 1972, p. 161, emphasis in original.

nature of God actually speak of something else. And that 'something else' is the ideology of which God is a feature: it is not that God himself is omnipresent, trans-historical and immutable, but, rather, the ideology in which God has a place. But this is to favour religious ideology over all other forms (we will need to wait for Althusser to do that himself). Instead, what Althusser has done is make full use of the catholicity of Christian theology: the claims to God's eternity, omnipresence etc. provide him with the language and system of thought to argue for the catholicity of ideology itself, of which religious ideology is but one part.

The general definition of this eternal ideology is the famous 'ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence'.[73] This is, however, merely the first thesis on the structure and functioning of ideology, and even here the primary example remains the question of God. God is not merely the imaginary representation of the real conditions of existence; rather, religious belief is a representation of the imaginary relations with real conditions. If it is eternal, it will not disappear, but now at two removes from any real conditions.

However, Althusser veers closer to religion, or, rather, ecclesiology through the primary example of the Church, with the second thesis – 'ideology has a material existence'. This section of the essay has drawn the occasional commentator to point to the extremely Spinozist form of his argument.[74] In particular, Althusser echoes Spinoza's argument that the cause can exist only in its effects, that God cannot be an external force, a creator who acts on the basis of an intention and plan. Instead, God is an immanent cause, inconceivable without his creation, whose intentions and decrees can exist only as they are actualised in that creation.[75] So also with ideology, which is immanent in its practices and apparatuses and cannot exist apart from them. Hardly a coincidence, then, that the explication of this thesis on the material existence of ideology should move all too readily into theological language.

---

[73] Althusser 1972, p. 162; see also Althusser 1990, pp. 24–5.

[74] See Montag 1995. As Althusser comments only a few pages later, 'to be a Spinozist or a Marxist… is to be exactly the same thing' (Althusser 1972, p. 175).

[75] As Montag quotes Spinoza: 'God could not have been prior to his decrees nor can he be without them' (Benedict Spinoza, *The Ethics*. Trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianopolis: Hackett, 1982)), Proposition 33, Scholium 2, quoted in Montag 1995, p. 63.

And so, in arguing for the material, rather than spiritual, existence of ideology he moves to particular or practical ideologies (religious, ethical, aesthetic etc.), each of which not only has a history but a location in an apparatus, an ISA and its practices. But now Althusser takes his general definition – the representation of the imaginary relations to real conditions – into this specific realm of practical ideologies and gives the example of the Church. We should, by now, not be surprised that his way of dealing with religion is the Church, now with a Spinozist twist. To begin with, the individual belief in God – an 'ideological "conceptual" device'[76] – produces the material attitude of the subject – mass, kneeling, praying, confession, penance, repentance etc. Even tensions with other ideas that lead to contradictory actions still exhibit the thesis that 'ideas' exist in actions. And, here, Althusser locates ideology in the ideological state apparatus:

> This ideology talks of actions; I shall talk of actions inserted into *practices*. *And* I shall point out that these practices are governed by the *rituals* in which these practices are inscribed, within the *material existence of an ideological apparatus*, be it only a small part of that apparatus: a small mass in a small church, a funeral, a minor match at a sports' club, a school day, a political party meeting, etc.[77]

His final move is to take a materialist slant on Pascal's formula, whereby the practices themselves – kneeling, praying, etc. – generate belief. Thus, a 'religious ideology can exist with rules, rites, etc., but without a systematic theology; the advent of theology represents a degree of theoretical systematisation of religious ideology'.[78] And, in this inversion, with the removal of the primacy of ideas (as spiritual) in ideology, a distinctly materialist philosophy of religion begins to emerge. Yet he can do so only by reverting to yet another ecclesiological example – a small mass, a funeral. Or, rather, Althusser misreads Pascal in a Spinozist fashion to point to the impossibility of separating ideas and beliefs from their material actions and rituals: belief does not so much follow act, but beliefs and ideas are always already inserted into practices and cannot exist without them.[79]

---

[76] Althusser 1972, p. 167.
[77] Althusser 1972, p. 168.
[78] Althusser 1990, p. 27.
[79] Montag 1995, pp. 67–9.

Once we begin reading in this way, it is surprising how often the example of the Church appears in Althusser's ISA essay.[80] But this should not surprise us, for, as I argued earlier, although he had by now left the Church far behind, it still leaves its marks all over him. Yet the Church is not a mere example, for it recurs too often in the ISA essay to remain in that category.[81] Rather, I would suggest that the form of the two theses on ideology – representations of imaginary relations and material existence – is analogous to the distinction between belief and practice, especially in the Roman-Catholic Church with its emphasis on ritual and the practice of religion. In other words, the favoured example of the Church hints at a deeper connection with his theory: the range and complexities of theological thought provide Althusser with the conceptual tools necessary for his profoundly influential recasting of the theory of ideology. Yet, his theory is not an implicit theology, or theology dressed up as philosophy (his accusation directed at Jean Lacroix), but a properly materialist theory of ideology that realises, as with Lenin's reading of Hegel, the internal logic of theology itself.

The final part of the ISA essay – the famous interpellation section – maintains the emphasis on ecclesial and theological questions. Or, rather, what follows this section does so: I refer here to the final and extended example from Christian religious ideology, an 'example' that has languished in singular obscurity.[82] Yet the two sections – the interpellation narrative and the reli-

---

[80] The contrast with the 'Ideological State Apparatuses' essay and the discussion of ideology in 'Marxism and Humanism' (Althusser 1969b, pp. 221–47; Althusser 1996, pp. 225–49) could not be sharper, for, in the latter essay, the pages devoted to ideology (Althusser 1969b, pp. 231–6; Althusser 1996, pp. 238–43) mention most of his main points without any reference to the Church.

[81] Although note the claim that Spinoza's reflections on the materiality of the ideology of Jewish religion, with its temples, priests, sacrifices, observances and rituals profoundly influenced his notion of ideology (Althusser 1994b, p. 217). Is this to be read as a nervousness about the pervasive theological tenor of the ideology essay?

[82] Even Paul Ricoeur, whom we might expect to comment on the ecclesiological and theological features of the last part of the ideology essay, gives it but the briefest of glances: all he says is that the notion of interpellation is based on the Christian idea of the call (Ricoeur 1994, p. 64). Michèle Barrett also notes the crucial last section in passing (Barrett 1991, p. 101). Thomas Pepper's (Pepper 1995) less than helpful discussion of religion in this essay focuses on the earlier reference to Pascal and neglects the last section entirely. Warren Montag's astute essay (Montag 1995) identifies the Spinozist features of the earlier theses but ignores the last part of the article. An exception is Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, (Rushdy 1992, pp. 35–42) although he argues that the religious 'example' falls short since the state, Althusser's ostensible subject, is not like God. This criticism misses the mark somewhat. And Gabriel Albiac's brief reading

gious example – belong inextricably together, for the interpellation narrative begins a final argument that is incomplete without the mis-named 'example'.

The interpellation section is an effort to deal with the final dimension of ideology, the subject. Thus, not only is there 'no ideology except by the subject and for subjects', but also 'ideology interpellates individuals as subjects'.[83] Both statements indicate a dialectical interplay between subject and ideology: the subject as a category is absolutely necessary for all ideology, but 'the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of "constituting" concrete individuals as subjects'.[84] Ideology requires subjects to function, but creating subjects is the function of ideology. This also means that 'subject', for Althusser, has the meaning of an ideologically constituted being, one who lives spontaneously in ideology.

Thus the interpellation narrative attempts to answer the question as to how ideology constitutes individuals as subjects, and the metaphor Althusser selects is that of interpellation or hailing. Yet the narrative is also an endeavour at understanding ideology in the context of the all-pervasive presence of ideology, the inability to escape ideology even in an analysis of ideology. In fact, the famous narrative is preceded by earlier narratives that indicate such a presence, put now in terms of ideological recognition. For Althusser, the 'It's me' response to 'Who's there?' and the French 'Hello, my friend' in the street illustrate such ideological recognition.

Given the impossibility of escaping ideology, particularly as Althusser has defined it, the interpellation narrative that follows is not so much an effort at escape as one that recognises the pervasiveness itself.

> I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'

(1997) argues that the last section of the ideology essay sets up the religious subject of Althusser's autobiography without explicating the argument in full.

[83] Althusser, 1972, p. 170.

[84] Althusser 1972, p. 171.

> Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn around. By this one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and 'that was *really him* who was hailed' (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailing is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by 'guilt feelings', despite the large numbers who 'have something on their consciences'.[85]

Althusser is keen to stress that the narrative sequence gives a false before-and-after effect, for ideology and the hailing of individuals as subjects is the same thing. That is, individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, and so individuals are always-already subjects.

However, the argument does not stop here, for in the following 'example' he takes religious ideology to develop the argument further. Despite appearances, it is not a specific example with its own variations, for 'the formal structure of all ideology is always the same'.[86] Although the call of Moses appears as the biblical exemplar, Althusser takes up a distinctly Roman-Catholic instance of ideology hailing individuals.[87] The implicitly 'catholic' tone of the well-known text I quoted above emerges clearly in the following, which deserves a fuller quotation precisely because it is less well-known:

> The Christian religious ideology says something like this… I address myself to you, a human individual called Peter (every individual is called by his name, in the passive sense, it is never he who provides his own name), in order to tell you that God exists and that you are answerable to Him. It adds: God addresses Himself to you through my voice.… It says: this is who you are: you are Peter! This is your origin, you were created by God for all eternity, although you were born in the 1920th year of Our Lord! This is your place in the world! This is what you must do! By these means, if you

---

[85] Althusser 1972, p. 174.
[86] Althusser 1972, p. 177.
[87] Rushdy's suggestion that the narrative should be called 'Mosaic interpellation' simply misses the Roman-Catholic specificity of the example (Rushdy 1992, p. 35).

> observe the 'law of love' you will be saved, you, Peter, and will become part of the Glorious Body of Christ! Etc.
>
> Now this is quite a familiar and banal discourse, but at the same time a surprising one.
>
> Surprising because if we consider that religious ideology is indeed addressed to individuals, in order to 'transform them into subjects', by interpellating the individual, Peter, in order to make him a subject, free to obey or disobey the appeal, i.e. God's commandments; if it calls these individuals by their names, thus recognizing that they are always-already interpellated as subjects with a personal identity (to the extent that Pascal's Christ says: 'It is for you that I have shed this drop of my blood!'); if it interpellates them in such a way that the subject responds: '*Yes, it is really me*!' if it obtains from them the *recognition* that they really do occupy the place it designates for them as theirs in the world, a fixed residence: 'It really is me; I am here, a worker, a boss or a soldier!' in this vale of tears; if it obtains from them the recognition of a destination (eternal life or damnation) according to the respect or contempt they show to 'God's Commandments', Law become Love – if everything does happen in this way (in the practices of the well-known rituals of baptism, confirmation, communion, confession and extreme unction, etc.…), we should note that all this 'procedure' to set up Christian religious subjects is dominated by a strange phenomenon: the fact that there can only be such a multitude of possible religious subjects on the absolute condition that there is a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*, i.e. God.[88]

Might not the second passage be read as a commentary on the first? Whereas, in the former quotation, Althusser places our already interpellated subject on the street, the setting of the second quotation is by no means explicit, although it conjures up an image of an individual kneeling at Church, addressed by God. But this is by no means necessary, for the second passage fills in much of the detail that the cryptic first passage leaves open. Apart from them both being narratives of interpellation, at the centre of the first is the 'physical conversion', a redirection that runs at so many levels: turning around in the street, religious conversion, the awareness upon such a 'conversion' that it

[88] Althusser 1972, pp. 177–8.

has always been so and that one's former direction was 'mistaken'. The second passage assumes such a 'conversion', now explicating it in terms of the address by God to an individual. Or, rather, it is the address of 'Christian religious ideology' to an individual, claiming that God speaks to him through such an ideology, constituting God and the individual as subjects in the process itself.

However, I want to stress first the Roman-Catholic saturation of the second passage in order to ask how it advances Althusser's theory of ideology. This passage could hardly be thought without Roman-Catholicism: God addresses the individual through 'religious ideology', i.e. the Church; the sample name is none other than 'Peter'; the implicit liturgical moment of confirmation when a new name is given and the person consciously recognises the call of the Church; the rituals or sacraments themselves, baptism, confirmation, communion, confession and especially extreme unction; the emphasis on obeying the commandments, the 'Law of Love'; and the quotation from Pascal, who has already appeared.

Althusser has made it rather easy for me, for the Christian religious ideology in question is none other than Roman-Catholic. But, in order to see how this translates all too readily into Althusser's 'catholicity', let me trace the rest of the argument. This 'religious ideology' calls a particular person, who, created by God, must respond to this call. God speaks to this person through the Bible and Church, and if this subject responds to the law of love he will have eternal life and so on. However, religious ideology has many subjects that all relate to or mirror God, a singular Subject (capital S). These then relate to each other, except that in Christian ideology the Subject also becomes subject – Christ – in order to present an example of 'salvation' for the many subjects. The point here is that all ideology has a mirror structure – duplication of Subject into subjects and Subject into subject-Subject – and centred in the Absolute Subject. Since religious ideology has both multiple subjects, a single Subject (God), and a relationship posited between the two, he argues that *all* ideology has the following features:

1. the interpellation of 'individuals' as subjects;
2. their subjection to the Subject;
3. the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other, and finally the subject's recognition of himself;

4. the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognise what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: Amen – '*So be it*'.[89]

The universal claim (all ideology), along with the final 'Amen' and its translation, the rush of the paragraph-long sentence in the previous quotation, but, above all, the identification of the one, absolutely other Subject at the centre of any ideology – all of these suggest a desire to say everything about ideology. Far from an example, the final catholic section of the essay takes the discussion of interpellation to its conclusion in the midst of the Church.

When this quadruple system is in play, subjects can operate perfectly well, without supervision. Through ideology and the rituals of the ISAs, subjects recognise the existing state of affairs and operate within them. All of which leads Althusser to his final formulation: 'the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection'.[90]

Only through the religious 'example', which is absolutely necessary to Athusser's argument, can he reach an answer to a question he posed somewhat earlier: why do people seek to represent their imaginary relationship with their real conditions of existence? The answer comes only at the end: so that people can work and live 'normally', that is, freely subject themselves to the Subject. Even here, Althusser draws on a paradox from the tradition of Christian theology, namely, the tension between free will and determinism, cast in a specifically Roman-Catholic form. Although most traditions attempt to hold the relation in some balance, however paradoxical, the emphasis tends to fall on one or the other. It seems to me that Althusser follows a Jansenist line: ideology operates successfully when subjects believe they are submitting of their own free will, even though ideology predetermines them to arrive at precisely this position.

The ISA essay is an extraordinary one and it is not for nothing that it remains a major focus in engagements with Althusser. But it seems to me that he walks a fine line here. Let me put it this way: does his effort to move beyond the traditional Marxist notion of ideology as false consciousness prove to be too

[89] Althusser 1972, p. 181.
[90] Althusser 1972, p. 182.

costly? There are two levels to an answer to this question. Firstly, Althusser himself is guilty on a number of occasions of precisely such a cruder version of ideology. Now, I am all in favour of a good dose of vulgar Marxism, but it gets us only so far. Thus, in 'Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle',[91] Althusser argues for such an idea of ideology – a system of representations dominated by a false conception of the world, one that enables the dominant and exploited classes to identify their relations to each other. And he argues that religion is the first form of ideology,[92] after which moral, juridical, aesthetic, political and philosophical forms appear. Following Marx and Engels, religion becomes not only the primary form of ideology, but also one that dominates until the eighteenth century, characteristic of peasant revolts and early stages of the workers' movement. It is, therefore, the prime instance of false consciousness, the thickest layer of mystification that must be discarded before we can take on the other layers.

Put this way, communist society becomes the first demystified society, the one in which the debilitating effect of ideology has been put aside for good. Althusser is, at times, taken with such a position, although occasionally with a curious twist. Thus, in the final chapter of *Machiavelli and Us* (1999), he argues for the use of religion as a necessary ideological instrument, an instrument for generating consent for a successful and united popular state. The tensions characteristic of the ISAs are noticeably absent. The problem, however, is that such a society sees itself beyond good and evil; that is, it worships itself as divine. Adorno was to find in such arguments and realities the return of the logic of idolatry, although for him it applied as much to the Left as to the Right.

Althusser took a different track. And the problem from him was that, if ideology permeates all human activities, then any position outside ideology, one that may identify its falsity or truth, becomes impossible. This is, of course, a standard criticism of the theory of ideology. Thus: 'Intellectuals live in culture, just as fish live in water; but fish cannot see the water in which they swim'.[93] Can intellectuals see the culture in which they live? Here, he will

---

[91] Althusser 1990, pp. 1–42.
[92] Althusser 1990, p. 25.
[93] Althusser 1990, p. 95.

argue for a gap, a break between the immediacy of intellectual labour and the broader ideological system that operates 'behind their backs', one that allows sufficient space to identify ideology's workings. But Althusser would take an even more radical path to argue that ideological projection is an indispensable function/fiction of all societies. It is the condition of symbolisation, through which society gives meaning to the world and itself. Precisely here, it seems to me, does the power of his catholicity come through. In the end, Althusser can only develop his theory of ideology by passing through ecclesiological and theological arguments, particularly those of the Catholic Church. In other words, this theological background provides the breakthrough and depth of his mature theory of ideology. He can then extrapolate from the Christian form of ideology to argue that 'Subject' can also designate – apart from God – State, Duty, Justice, and so on. The catholicity of this particular form of Christianity becomes the precursor of the universality of this theory of ideology.

Myth

If ideology falls as a glaringly obvious category for any materialist theory of religion, then the second category – myth – is not so obvious. But it is the means by which Althusser gets to the question of myth that is the most intriguing of all: biblical criticism. Althusser as a theological thinker may be strange enough, but Althusser as a biblical critic? Elsewhere, I have drawn material from Althusser's work in order to offer a reading of the book of Genesis,[94] but Althusser himself has a moment or two of his own exegesis. His moment of biblical exegesis would of course appear in a footnote, and it is the only time he engages directly with a biblical text. But then, it is an astonishing footnote, one that deals at some length with Genesis 1–3. Let me begin with the text itself:

> The plunge of the product into Nature, which occurs as soon as the product escapes the producer's control and is no longer posited as being identical with him, gives us a better grasp of the creation myth. On the purest conception, God is the circularity of Love; he is sufficient unto himself and has no outside. The creation is literally a rupture in this circularity: God does not need the creation, so that it is, by definition, different from

[94] See Boer 2003, Chapter 1.

him. This non-identity of the Creator and his creature is the emergence of Nature. The product of the God-who-works escapes his control (because it is superfluous for him). This fall is Nature, or God's outside. In the creation, then, men unwittingly repress the essence of work. But they do still more: they try to eliminate the very origins of work, which, in its daily exercise, appears to them as a natural necessity (one has to work in order to live, work is a natural law entailed by the Fall – as appears in the myth of Eve: 'you will earn your bread by the sweat of your brow'). Moreover, work is inherently conditioned by nature, since the worker transforms a nature that is given. In the creation myth, this natural character of work disappears, because the Creator is not subject to any law, and creates the world *ex nihilo*. In God the Creator, men not only think the birth of nature, but attempt to overcome the natural character of this birth by demonstrating that the creation has no origin (since God creates without obligation or need); that the fall has no nature; and that the very nature which seems to dominate work is, fundamentally, only as necessary as the (produced) nature which results from work.

Developing and deepening this myth would perhaps enable us to anticipate what Marx means by 'the identity of man and nature in work'. Approached in this way, that identity would have two aspects. On the one hand, men are identical with nature in that they are identical with what they produce; their products become nature for them (this immediate identity through labour re-emerges in revolutionary action; one may therefore say that this alienation is already overcome in thought – men no longer need a myth to represent it, since it has become the object of economic science). On the other hand, men would also be identical with the nature that forces them to work, and which they transform through work; this second identity would be clarified through reflection of the first. Here, however, we would have only an embryonic anticipation, for, in the obvious, elementary sense, identity is still beyond men's grasp. Men see clearly enough that the natural world is given to them, and that they themselves exist because they exercise a measure of control over it, thanks to their knowledge and industry; however, they have not completely overcome natural alienation: they are subject to the elements, illness, and old age, and obliged to work in order to live. Moreover, if the work of scientific knowledge and of the transformation of the world is itself a recurrence of, and recovery from [*reprise*], natural

> alienation, the recovery is not complete: circularity is not re-established, and human circularity will no doubt be established before natural circularity (in a socialist world, say the Marxists, one will still have to overcome natural alienation). This deficiency explains why it is still necessary to revert to myth in order to conceive a totality which has not yet attained its concept; it is in the story of creation, on this view, that men contemplate the *reprise* of natural alienation.[95]

This text comes from Althusser's Masters thesis on Hegel, before his all too rapid dismissal of the early, humanist Marx, especially on the whole question of alienation. Here, in the early Althusser, we find an intense engagement precisely with those questions of alienation and nature, particularly in terms of the creation myth. But before I immerse myself in Althusser's text, a comment on the immediate context. Althusser seeks to read the narrative of the Fall in light of Marx's argument concerning the Fall of the product of human labour into nature. This argument follows a discussion of alienation in which the apparently natural form of economic determinism is, in fact, a human product: although the economy appears natural, to which human beings are subject, it only appears so because it is alienated from human beings. Thus, the realisation of human freedom is the process of reclaiming this natural necessity as a human necessity. So also with labour, for the moment the product leaves the hands of men it falls into nature, appears perfectly natural, a signal of the alienation of labour (for the early Marx, whom Althusser read avidly before dismissing this work and the theory of alienation as not properly Marxist). I still think that Althusser was too quick to dismiss the early Marx, especially on the whole question of alienation, since this is an extraordinary note that Althusser would need to jettison along with the early, humanist non-Marxist Marx.

And then comes the footnote. There are three stages of his argument that I will exegete in some detail: the Fall as narrative of the alienation of labour; the story of creation itself as a counter to such alienation; and where such a myth might continue to function.

Only once does Althusser quote from the Bible (Gen 3: 19), and this a misquotation to which I will return. But the solitary biblical reference indicates

---

[95] Althusser 1997, p. 168, n. 252; Althusser 1994a, pp. 236–8, n. 252.

the heavily theological nature of his reading, where the narrative of Genesis 1–3 is overlaid with a number of Christian doctrines: the self-sufficiency of God, *creatio ex nihilo*, and original sin. The transition from the mention of the 'creation myth' – by which, of course, he means the creation myth of the Hebrew Bible subsequently appropriated by Christians – in the first sentence to the next couple of sentences on the self-sufficiency of God is not as smooth as it seems. Too quickly do we assume that he is still speaking of the creation myth of Genesis 1–3 (although, even here, we have two myths) when he already draws upon a particular Christian doctrine of God to interpret the narrative of Genesis. And this is the Thomistic doctrine of the self-sufficiency of God, that God does not need the world or anything outside of his triune nature to be complete, for otherwise he would be incomplete and therefore not God. Divine love then becomes one of pure gratuity, one in which God loves the world precisely because he does not need to do so, a love that has no reciprocity about it and is thoroughly undeserved by God's creatures. It matters little whether the doctrine of God's self-sufficiency was developed in order to facilitate such a notion of love or whether self-sufficiency produces the particular idea of love that has, to a large extent, determined the perception and practice of love in the West.

To be sure, the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2 have been used to justify the doctrine of God's self-sufficiency, but it is hardly the case that the text itself is a pure, or even contaminated, representation of the doctrine. The two forms of ancient Near-Eastern myths that we find in the biblical text show all the marks of that indeterminate context, from the plural gods ('Let us make man in our image' Gen 1: 26) to the ambiguity of the first phrase of Genesis 1: 1, which may be either 'In the beginning God created' or 'When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth without form and void'. The implication of the second translation, based on what may also be read as a temporal construction, *bereshith*, 'When [God] began' (literally 'in a beginning') is that there was indeed something with which God began, rather than the vast emptiness that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* assumes. And here we have the second traditional Christian doctrine that Althusser assumes in his discussion of Genesis 1–3, one that faces a good deal of trouble when brought face to face with the text.

However, I am not so much interested in charging Althusser with being a less than astute exegete of the Hebrew Bible than with the implications of

such a heavily theological reading. To begin with, the overbearing presence of the Catholic Church is there in every word: for the Roman-Catholic Church has been most insistent that the Church sets the agenda for interpretation of the Bible, that it provides the means and meanings by which the Bible must be understood. And for good reason, since the reading of the actual text raises perpetual problems for the doctrines the Church holds dear. Yet, the Roman Catholics only make explicit that which is part of any type of Christianity, namely, that interpretation is always determined by the institution itself. The most subtle form that this takes is in the Calvinist notion that Scripture is sufficient unto itself, that it can only interpret itself with no outside body imposing a foreign interpretation. I need not elaborate on the way this ensures precisely what it seeks to forestall, since any interpretation that runs against the institution is dismissed as a foreign body in the pure self-sufficiency of the Bible itself.

But what does Althusser do with his heavily theological reading of the creation myth? The doctrine of the self-sufficiency, or auto-generation and auto-telism, of God allows him to offer a reading of the doctrine, and then obliquely, of the narrative of the Fall, in light of the early Marx's notion of alienation. Given the theological – although not necessarily biblical – doctrine of the triune self-sufficiency of God, what Althusser calls the 'circularity of Love', creation can only be something extraneous to God. It cannot be intrinsic to God (pantheism), and so nature is superfluous to the divine economy. The telling move is from arguing that nature is the result of the non-identity of God and his creature to the identification of God as worker who loses control of the product of his labour. On this reading, God becomes the model of the worker (although it is not clear whether such a worker lives under capitalism) whose product falls into nature the moment it is finished; or, rather, the Fall is itself nature. But, just when we seem to have Althusser's point – the theological reading of the creation myth as a curious precursor to the pattern of work itself – he executes a double switchback: 'In the creation, then, men unwittingly repress the essence of work'.[96] God's creation is the model of work but only because it is a myth that 'men' relate in order to explicate the meaning of work. But not quite, for Althusser writes, 'men unwittingly repress': they

[96] Althusser 1997, p. 168; Althusser 1994a, p. 237.

do not express, explicate or elucidate the essence of work, but *repress* it. In other words, the Christian doctrine of creation with which Althusser overlays the creation myth is a narrative of the alienation of labour. In God's self-sufficiency, his auto-generation of the creature that is a stranger to him, that is not part of his nature, lies the alienation of labour. But what is repressed? For an early Althusser indebted to an early Marx, this will be un-alienated labour, that which is repressed by what he takes as the creation myth.

The close reader of Hegel and the early Marx that Althusser is at this point finds alienation [*Entausserung*] not only in the objectification of the product of labour but also in the relationship with nature itself. And God in the creation myth is also the representation of this alienation. Nature is systematically excised: God is beyond the law, creates *ex nihilo*, which then becomes the absence of obligation and need, the tautological absence of the origin of creation, and the restriction of nature to the product of work which then falls into nature at the moment of its production. Except that all of these items in Althusser's list are very much part of the Christian doctrines of the God's self-sufficiency and *creatio ex nihilo*, as well as the philosophical category of nature, rather than the creation myths of Genesis themselves. This is not to say that these myths are somehow free from a whole series of problems of their own, many of them turning around questions of gender, ideology, politics, the Lacanian symbolic and so on.[97] However, Althusser's theological reading of the creation myths does bring out another crucial element of these myths, namely, the question of labour.

It seems to me that this foundational material may in fact be read as part of a much larger political myth that runs from Genesis to Joshua, turning around the questions of the promise of a people and a land. If the former is realised ambiguously only when Jacob's family arrives in Egypt, outside the land that Abraham has spent his life traversing in the book of Genesis, the latter is almost inevitably delayed until its troubled fulfilment in the book of Joshua, the first book outside the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy). But what the myths of Creation and the Fall do work over is the question of the division of labour, revealing and attempting to deal with the myriad tensions of such a question in the way that myths are able to do like no other genre. And, at the heart of

[97] On this, see my forthcoming *Political Myth* (Duke).

the division of labour, is the vexed problem of the logically, if not historically, primary division along the lines of sexual difference.

Less an explicit acknowledgement than through the odd phrase and mistake, Althusser hints at the ways the questions of the division of labour and sexual difference might become central in a reading of Genesis. Let me return to the Fall, which, for Althusser, now becomes part of the creative act by God. The Fall is not something the human beings enact after the Creation is complete, from which God is removed and thereby not responsible. Rather, the Fall is, on Althusser's reading, inherent in the myth of Creation itself. Unwittingly he picks up a tension in the whole Creation-Fall narrative of Genesis 1–3: if the Creation were perfect, why would God place the forbidden two trees in the garden, one of the knowledge of good and evil and the other of eternal life? Is there not a flaw in the crystal, as David Jobling has argued, one that is geared to the breakdown of paradise as a necessary narrative device? And the Thomist doctrine of Creation onto which Althusser latches neatly captures the truth of this contradiction: the Fall is in the act of Creation itself, which he now reads as a narrative of alienated labour.

What of the conventional Fall that is contained in Gen 3: 1–24? Is it merely an addendum to the real Fall in Creation? That which is usually identified as the 'Fall' becomes an effort to 'eliminate the very origins of work'.[98] Here, work becomes a natural necessity through an etiological narrative that misplaces the origins of work: as a result of their disobedience, their eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil at the enticement of the serpent and then of the women brings about the curse of God on all three, serpent, man and woman. The serpent is to go upon his belly, eat dust and be at enmity with the woman and her seed; the woman will have her pain in childbearing multiplied and be subject to the man for whom she will feel desire; and the man will find the ground cursed, full of thorns and thistles, which he will need to work in order to eat: 'in the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground' (Gen 3: 19). For Althusser, this narrative is not about the origins of work, but its very elimination, providing justification for the notion that one must work in order to live, that it is a 'natural law entailed by the Fall'.[99]

---

[98] Althusser 1997, p. 168; Althusser 1994a, p. 237.
[99] Ibid.

Here, Althusser's argument takes a slightly different turn that is more than the 'still more' that opens this part of his discussion. Rather than operating with an underlying assumption that there is an un-alienated form of labour (he will return to this), he suggests that work itself is not a given for Marx. The criticism of Baudrillard,[100] that labour becomes an ontological category for Marx, an eternal necessity for human beings, falls under Althusser's point. For Althusser, the idea that work is a natural necessity constitutes the elimination of the origins of work. The implication is that work, properly understood, is not a natural law, not an ontological category, but one subject to the vagaries of history, with its own narrative of beginning and end. For Marx, the origins and, if I may use the term, nature of labour, lie in the interaction of human beings with nature: work is not part of nature, is not a necessity of such a nature.

However, before I get to that point, which is the last part of Althusser's own re-reading of the creation myth, let me pick up a couple of symptomatic misreadings of Genesis. Neither is plainly wrong, but rather exploits an ambiguity in the text itself that allows it to run in an unexpected direction. The first, appearing earlier in the text than the long footnote that interests me so much, concerns the two trees in Genesis 2: 9, 16–17 and 3: 1–3. Althusser writes, 'In Eden, Adam and Eve could eat of the tree of life, but were forbidden to touch the tree of knowledge'.[101] Of course, it is the tree of knowledge that interests the Hegel concerning whom Althusser writes his Masters thesis. But, in this brief sentence, Althusser takes a textual ambiguity on its own path. In Gen 2: 9, the 'tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' are specified out of all the other trees that God made grow and that were good to mouth and eye. By verses 16 and 17, we find a ban on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but the command of God, 'You may freely eat of every tree in the garden' (Gen 2: 16). The implication is as Althusser, reading Hegel, takes it: that Adam and Eve could indeed eat freely of the tree of life. But all is not so clear, for in the initial moments of the dialogue between the serpent and the woman, she says in response to the serpent's question, 'God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die"' (Gen 3: 3).

---

[100] Baudrillard 1975.
[101] Althusser 1997, p. 65; Althusser 1994a, p. 99.

However, in 2: 17, the phrase 'in the midst of the garden' applies to the tree of life and not the other one. In fact, Eve refuses to specify which tree she means, and it is only the serpent who clarifies that he means the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the following verses. The hint of a mistaken arborial identity in 3: 3 – are both trees under a ban? Has Eve already acquiesced to eat of the tree of good and evil in her words? – unwraps in 3: 22, where the risk of the human beings eating of the tree of life as well and thereby living forever prompts the (plural) God to banish the people from the garden: 'Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever…'. The only explicit proscription on the tree of life is belated, one that comes into effect when Adam and Eve broach the primary ban. Althusser's reading, based on Gen 2: 9, 16–17, follows a perfectly viable way to read this text, except that, like most, it decides on one at the expense of other options. But it is an interpretation that rubs up against the expectations of readers for whom this text is intimately familiar.

In the end, Althusser's wooden interpretation does not come to much, except perhaps to give a hint of the way he works with texts. It anticipates the much more consequential 'misreading' of Genesis 3: 19 in the footnote I have been considering for a while now. Quoting from the Segond edition of the Bible, which was found in his library after his death, he writes: 'as appears in the myth of Eve: "you will earn your bread by the sweat of your brow"'.[102] 'Earn your bread [*gagneras ton pain*]' rather than the Hebrew 'eat [*'kl*]' lends itself more to a metaphorical interpretation, although this is not excluded by 'eat your bread'. But what interests me is the curious phrase 'as appears in the myth of Eve [*comme on le voit dans le mythe d'Eve*]'.[103] He does not write 'as appears in God's words to Eve', which would be strictly incorrect, for the words are directed to Adam, not Eve: he is the one who shall work. Nor is it strictly a myth of Eve, but a myth of the Fall. Even so, Althusser seems to take the words as those addressed to Eve. Yet, in Genesis 3, her 'labour' is not to work the fields full of thorns and thistles, to toil in order to eat. Rather, God says to Eve: 'I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children' (Gen 3: 16).

---

[102] Althusser 1997, p. 168; Althusser 1994a, p. 237.
[103] Althusser 1994a, p. 237.

We might read this slip on Althusser's part in a number of ways. To begin with, he unwittingly identifies the problem with the whole question of labour itself, namely, that it is men who work and are alienated in their work, whereas women in gestation, childbirth and child-rearing do no work: it is a natural process beyond the realm of labour. Here, his criticism of the myth of the Fall comes to bear: the very identification of 'work' as natural is even more the case with the maternal body. If the elimination of the origins of work takes place with the idea that men must work in order to live, then the notion that childbirth is a natural process is an even greater elimination of the origins of work, the ultimate form of the alienation of labour. Yet, this does not go quite far enough, and here I anticipate the later stages of his rereading of the creation myth. A second unconscious outcome of Althusser's misreading is the commonplace of feminist criticism that Adorno and Horkheimer were the first to make: the identification of women with nature. In specifying Eve rather than Adam as the recipient of the curse of work, Althusser brings out the truth of the Genesis narrative: the pain of the woman's childbirth is at one with the toil required of the man to produce bread. Althusser will later make this assumption crucial in his own argument with the statement that nature is a given, but, here, he provides a glimpse of the problem with such an identification.

Yet, a third level of reading Althusser's misquotation picks up a final ambiguity of the Genesis narrative. On this level, and here I anticipate his discussion of the possibilities for un-alienated work, the problem becomes one of the parallelism between the curses for both the woman and Adam. He will toil and sweat over the ground in order to produce bread; she will labour in pain in order to produce children from her own body. In both cases, they work, one with the ground, another with her body. But the problem with both is that the work they do becomes, through the myth of the Fall, a natural necessity. Their work, which is identified with pain and toil, is therefore part of nature, unavoidable. For Althusser, however, the key lies in Marx's point that there is an identity of nature and work that does not make alienated labour a law of nature. Both woman and man remain alienated as long the products of their work fall into nature, that is, continue to become something beyond themselves and not identical with them. And, as long as there are pain, death, disease, natural disasters and so on, human beings remain alienated from the nature that forces them to work. On this highly eschatological point, Althusser

loops back to the last part of Genesis 3 on which I have focused for a few moments. But I have also anticipated the later part of his argument, to which I can return soon.

Yet, before I do so, I want to go back to the first reading of Althusser's misreading, where I argued that the problem with the curse on Eve in Genesis 3 is that it makes childbirth a natural process and not work. Now all of this is inverted, or, at least, becomes a new problem at another level of the dialectic: the most fundamental alienation is, if I may put it in such a convoluted fashion, the naturalisation of labour that is itself an alienation of nature itself, or, rather, between nature and work. In other words, the first alienation is to transform a natural process into work, and the second alienation is to make this work a part of nature. In this way, I read Althusser's comment on the creation myth: 'In God the Creator, men not only think the birth of nature, but attempt to overcome the natural character of this birth'.[104] The alienation of the labour of childbirth finds its ultimate expression in the Creator's act of Creation, for here, in the very process of writing a myth of the birth of nature 'men' erase such a birth's natural character. Of course, Althusser is, as I mentioned earlier, dependent on the Hegelian notions of the alienation of the product of labour and of nature itself, but I want to suggest that it is precisely through such troubled categories, ones that he would soon reject, that he is able to come, however obliquely, to a profound insight. Once there, he (or, rather, I) can kick away the ladder by which he got there in the first place.

In the second paragraph of Althusser's footnote, one that I have been exegeting in some detail, he seeks to explicate, or rather develop and deepen, the creation myths (or what he continues to refer to as a singular myth, which it has indeed become in Jewish and Christian usage). The purpose: to see how it 'anticipates' Marx's famous phrase: 'the identity of man and nature in work'. This 'anticipate' is ambiguous, for although he suggests that a more sustained reading of the creation myth may turn it into a precursor to Marx's own formulation, he ends up reading the myth in Marxist terms. The 'development', in a Marxist fashion, renders the myth an anticipation of precisely those Marxist categories. Dialectical or ambiguous? I am not sure, but, in my reading, I have been arguing that Althusser in this early text provides some

[104] Althusser 1997, p. 168; Althusser 1994a, p. 237.

of the most detailed possibilities for a materialist philosophy of religion. And what he does with the second paragraph is seek out the possibilities of un-alienated labour, the first option being the identity of worker and product, the second of worker and the nature that forces him to work. I find much of this less promising than the first paragraph, since Althusser slips back into assumptions that are troubled by his other arguments, particularly the idea that nature is a given.

Thus, on the first point – the identity of worker with product and thus with nature – Althusser moves rapidly to argue that such an identity takes place in revolutionary action. He leaves aside the next step, but I am going to assume it in Althusser's cryptic argument: that the other side of the revolution would also embody such an identity of worker and nature. What interests me, however, is the concluding observation, 'this alienation is already overcome in thought – men no longer need a myth to represent it, since it has become the object of economic science'.[105] It is no longer the creation myth *per se*, but any myth that is in question. For Althusser, myth itself will pass, and the condition for such a passing is the overcoming of alienation. Not the overcoming in reality, in terms of class, politics and economics, but in thought. When it becomes possible to think of an un-alienated condition, then the need for myth has gone and economic science takes over. Apart from the anticipation of Althusser's later scientific Marxism, he shares at this point the problematic assumption of other Marxists such as Benjamin and Adorno, for whom myth in all its ambiguity could ultimately only be negative. In contrast to Benjamin (for whom the myth of capitalism was one with its dream phantasmagoria) and Adorno (the dialectic of myth and history, as well the entwinement of nature and myth meant it would not so easily disappear and so what one requires is a constant mythological suspicion), Althusser relies here on a conventional notion of the early Marx, that myth itself is part of ideology, which is itself mystification and false consciousness, the mark and result of alienation. Eliminate alienation, and myth will follow.

I am not sure that there is much mileage in such a position on myth, and Althusser would only become less patient with the function of myth. At least explicitly, for his later theory of ideology implies a continued presence of myth in any political economic formation, for myth becomes one, eternal, mode of

[105] Ibid.

representing the relationship with real social conditions. He hints at this in the second point ('On the other hand') on the identity of work and nature. Over against the abolition of myth in the promised union of labour and its product in revolutionary action, myth remains to bridge the gap between labour and the nature that forces human beings to work. Spoken otherwise, one can imagine the identity of human beings and transformed nature (the nature that results from human work), but the identity of human beings and untransformed nature (that with which we first engage in work itself) is a thought that has yet to make its way into human consciousness. Or, in terms he uses a little later, 'human circularity', the overcoming of human alienation that echoes the language he uses for God earlier on, is conceivable, but natural circularity is not, for 'in a socialist world, say the Marxists, one will still have to overcome natural alienation'.[106]

However, just when I feel that I can accuse Althusser of falling back to a theory of myth as a gap-filler, as a temporary measure until a properly socialist society can be achieved, his argument becomes much more complex. The temptation to seize on his suggestion that nature is a 'given' (is it a 'given' as an unacknowledged and unrequited producer, like woman?), that existence relies on 'control', 'knowledge' and 'industry' (does this not posit nature as a hostile other that threatens human existence?) must hold off, since this is only the 'obvious, elementary sense'.[107] I could point out that, even since the time in which Althusser wrote, nature has ceased to function in human consciousness in such a fashion: no longer a given with which human beings must wrestle, nature is that which human beings choose not to exploit, to preserve as smaller (national parks, wilderness and world heritage zones) and vaster regions (Antarctica). Or that the suggestion that the presence of illness, old age and the fact that human beings are still subject to the elements is a profoundly utopian image of a communist world. But Althusser moves on – 'moreover' he writes – from the hint of the last item in his list of signs of natural alienation, namely, the continued presence of work as itself an interaction and transformation of nature in order to live. This work, as well as that of scientific knowledge and the transformation of the world itself, is not merely a necessary process to the achievement of communist society, to the overcoming

[106] Althusser 1997, p. 168; Althusser 1994a, p. 238.
[107] Althusser 1997, p. 168; Althusser 1994a, p. 237.

of natural alienation, but it is, more importantly, an incomplete 'recurrence of, and recovery from (*reprise*), natural alienation'.[108] Work itself, the need to interact with and transform nature, becomes, in Althusser's text, a mark of alienation itself, a recurrence of natural alienation, as well as a recovery from that alienation. I could read this conjunction of recurrence and recovery as a trap, as the closing down of any possibility of moving into communism, for, if the mode of recovery is the same process that perpetuates natural alienation, then the way out is barred forever. However, I will read differently, in the sense that work, understood in the basic Marxist sense, and this includes the work of science that Althusser would later favour so much in his ideal model of Marxism, will itself pass when and if a communist society arrives. This would be a more radical reading of both Marx's phrase with which Althusser begins the second paragraph, and of Althusser's own interpretation. Simply put, if work is one of the signs of natural alienation – the antagonism between human beings and the rest of a nature from which they cannot be separated – then the overcoming of natural alienation means the abolition of work in any known sense. Here, we come upon the limits of any language to speak of a thoroughly different world whose language cannot as yet be imagined. Is this not Althusser's point in the end, that a fully communist society without natural alienation is unable to be thought?

What, finally, of myth? Let me quote again the last sentence of Althusser's footnote: 'This deficiency explains why it is still necessary to revert to myth in order to conceive a totality which has not yet attained its concept; it is in the story of creation, on this view, that men contemplate the *reprise* of natural alienation'.[109] The key lies with the French word *reprise*, which bears the senses of resumption, return and repair or mending. He has already used the word in relation to work and a communist society free from natural alienation; now myth takes on a function comparable to work: the resumption or return (as in tennis) and mending (as of a sock) of natural alienation is crucial to both work and myth. I want to pick up the wonderful image of darning or mending a sock in order to speak of myth. Rather than the gap-filling function of myth, hinted at by the 'still necessary', or even the pre-scientific mode of thinking

[108] Althusser 1997, p. 168; Althusser 1994a, p. 238.
[109] Ibid.

suggested by 'not yet attained its concept', myth takes on in this final sentence of Althusser's a more substantial function, both utopian and dialectical.

The two are, of course, intimately related, especially in Louis Marin's terms. Thus, myth conceives 'a totality which has not yet attained its concept'.[110] This is more oriented to the future than Lévi-Strauss's widely influential understanding of myth as the effort to resolve social contradictions (Althusser's later definition of ideology will draw closer to Lévi-Strauss). As a genre of thinking and imagination that seeks to circumvent the restrictions of language in order to speak about an inarticulable future, myth might be understood as an impossible attempt to draw its terms from that future. I have suggested this with Walter Benjamin earlier in this book: the dialectical leap of myth is not that it uses another means, an alternative genre, to speak about a desired world (in itself, this is enough of a challenge to theories of myth that reiterate the crude designation of myth as circular and therefore locked into unchanging repetition), but that myth itself is an imperfect genre of thinking that derives its terms and very mode of operating from that future, reaching across to grasp in a loose and slippery grip a glimpse of that yet to be achieved totality.

The other side of the semi-colon in Althusser's sentence gives us the particular mechanism, if I may use the term, of myth's utopian function (all the while with Marin peering over my shoulder). As the *reprise* of natural alienation, both its return and mending, myth turns out to be, for Althusser, a thoroughly dialectical exercise. The impossible conjunction of recurrence and repair, perpetuation and overcoming, or my favoured return and mending, is not so much the trap of myth as the utopian function of the dialectic. I am tempted to read this in Adorno's fashion, where one pushes each term of the dialectic as far as it will go until it unwillingly yields to the other term: in this case, the very condition for the mending that myth provides relies upon its recurrence of natural alienation. In other words, only through the return of natural alienation is the repairing, darning function of myth possible. But the more difficult obverse then also applies: that mending, when taken all the way through, sees a recurrence of precisely that natural alienation one sought to repair. But, here, Marin becomes extremely useful, for it is not in the content of the terms themselves that the possibilities for utopia open out, but in the form of the dialectic that Althusser states without developing here. For

[110] Ibid.

Marin, utopia becomes possible when the terms of the dialectic are allowed to run at full stretch, to let them go rather than rein them in, all of which brings him to the notion of neutralisation as the crucial utopian feature. Neither contradiction, nor contrariness, nor even the resolution of the dialectic, but the neutralisation of the terms in their release.[111]

Except that, in the Marin-driven reading of Althusser I have offered, there remains what Marin would regard as impossible conjunction, that between myth and utopia. For Marin, the two are incompatible, myth barring the road to utopia and utopia seeing myth off the field. Althusser, it seems to me, opens a line of thought in which myth and utopia are less antagonists than necessary allies, precisely in Marin's terms. One final observation on a stretch of text on which I have already indulged myself: at the close of the note, Althusser loops back to where he began, for it is not merely myth *per se* (although I have taken some warranted license in order to speak of myth for a while). Rather, he writes of the 'story of creation' that may be read, however theologically in Althusser's case, not merely as the effort to deal in narrative form with the alienation of labour, but also as the *reprise* of natural alienation, its return and mending, as well as the not-yet conceived totality.

In this long discursus on myth, spinning around Althusser's reading of the creation myths in Genesis, I have cut a path between the two parts of his work that he fiercely sought to keep separate. For the discussion of myth that we find in this long footnote is replete with the terminology and concepts of Hegel, the early Marx and theology itself, all of which Althusser would later excise as a militant scientific Marxist. Does this mean that religion and the possibilities for a materialist philosophy thereof belong to a youthful enthusiasm that one puts away with maturity, the giving away of youthful speech and thought? No, for my argument has been not only that Althusser was too thorough in his expulsion of Hegel and the early Marx, especially on alienation and labour, but that it is possible to appropriate his conclusions regarding myth without endorsing the means by which he got there. It seems to me that any materialist philosophy of religion that neglects myth is left halting. The function of myth in a materialist philosophy of religion? As the *reprise* of natural alienation, it provides precisely through the dialectial tension of the term itself space for the concept of utopia in Althusser's work.

---

[111] Marin 1984.

Conclusion: the terminus of (auto)biography?

Throughout this chapter, I have traced the various shapes of Althusser's catholicity: the alliances sought and dispelled in his early theological writings, the catholic blind spot in these same texts, and the necessarily ecclesiastical form of his departure from the Church. But what is most fascinating about Althusser's work is not merely that we find the residue of the Church in his later work, not merely that some of his major contributions cannot be thought without theology, but that he also provides the logical possibility and seeds of a materialist philosophy of religion.

But now, at last, (auto)biography. I have left this question until last, since it tends to affect nearly all Althusser studies in some way or another, particularly the murder of Hélène and the events following her death, but also the chronic bouts of depression and manic productivity of a bipolar psychological state. Biography seems to follow a number of paths in Althusser criticism, one completely ignoring it, except perhaps as a series of unfortunate incidents in the life of a brilliant man, another attempting to ward off the undermining effect on Althusserianism itself, and a third seeking the key to his work in his troubled psyche and difficult relationship with Hélène. If the latter option over-reaches itself, the former speaks with a perpetual sense of repression.

Yet, if I shift focus to Althusser's relationship with the Roman-Catholic Church, then that biography everywhere seems to confirm my argument concerning the absent cause of the Church in his work: his training by Catholic intellectuals, Jean Guitton, Jean Lacroix, Joseph Hours (Père Hours) at the Lycée du Parc at Lyons for the entrance exam to the École normale supérieure;[112] the continued influence of Guitton and Hours in his life;[113] the various publications in Catholic journals such as *Dieu Vivant*, *Témoinage Chrétien* and *Lumière et Vie* from 1946 to 1966;[114] the 'first political cell' he formed in Catholic Action while at the Lycée, replete with chaplain and retreats to a Trappist monastery;[115] the continued interest in the community Jeunesse de l'Église and the left, Catholic l'Union des Chrétiens Progressistes, from which many activists, such as Maurice Caveing, Jean Chesneaux, François Ricci and Althusser

---

[112] Althusser 1994b, pp. 92–4; Althusser 1992, pp. 83–7.

[113] Althusser 1994b, pp. 162, 205, 315, 346; Althusser 1992, pp. 154, 197, 309, 338.

[114] See Matheron 1997. The items in question are: Althusser (as Robert Leclos) 1946, 10 and 17 May, Althusser 1946, and Althusser 1969a.

[115] Althusser 1994b, pp. 95–6, 305–6; Althusser 1992, pp. 87–8, 299.

himself, joined the Communist Party, the antithesis of its purpose;[116] the influence of the political vision of 'Père Hours' in such a transition for Althusser himself;[117] the close connection with the religious community of Jeunesse de l'Église at Petit-Clamard under the direction of Maurice Montuclard and the attraction of the monastic vows of chastity, manual labour and silence later in life as a solution to all his problems;[118] his trips to see the pope, whether Pius XII or John XXIII;[119] the interest in liberation theology;[120] and statements such as 'I was still a believer'[121] and 'I kept my "faith" for a long time, until 1947 or thereabouts'.[122]

Autobiography is, of course, the most treacherous ground upon which to base an argument for Althusser's 'Catholic' Marxism, even though Douglas Johnson does his best in the introduction to *The Future Lasts a Long Time*.[123] He suggests that Althusser's connections with the Church remained ambiguous. Nothing formal, critical of the director of *Esprit*, Emmanuel Mounier, who nevertheless published some of his work, scornful of Jean-Yves Calvez's interpretations of Marx, yet he kept up relations with individual Catholics such as Jean Guitton. With a degree from the University of Lille, Johnson suggests that with a Catholic upbringing and as a former leader in the Catholic youth, he remained sympathetic to the social-Catholic movement and the worker-priest idea, always seeking a reconciliation between Catholicism and Communism.

But Johnson hints[124] at the role of the *canular*, or practical joke, in the life and work of a *normalien*, although he restricts it to incidents in the autobiography such as de Gaulle asking him for a light in the street,[125] or the claim that he was a fraud as a philosopher, never reading much (especially of Marx), nor studying for his exams. And the editors, Corpet and Boutang, argue that the

---

[116] Althusser 1994b, pp. 205–6; Althusser 1992, pp. 197–8.
[117] Althusser 1994b, pp. 205, 315; Althusser 1992, pp. 197, 308–9.
[118] Althusser 1994b, p. 96; Althusser 1992, p. 88.
[119] Althusser 1994b, pp. 122–3, 346; Althusser 1992, pp. 114–15, 338.
[120] Matheron 1997; Breton 1993.
[121] Althusser 1994b, p. 123; Althusser 1992, p. 114; translation modified.
[122] Althusser 1994b, p. 205; Althusser 1992, p. 198.
[123] Johnson 1994. In his reading of Althusser's autobiography, Gabriel Albiac notes the common point: '…autobiography is an essentially mystifying literary genre' (Albiac 1997, p. 81).
[124] Johnson 1994, pp. xvi–xvii.
[125] Althusser 1994b, p. 347; Althusser 1992, p. 339.

whole autobiography is the work of both a madman and philosopher, a mix of fact and delusion, hallucination.

Rather than playing the game of determining the phantasy from the 'facts' of his life,[126] it seems to me that a more ingenious motif appears in the work itself, specifically with respect to the Roman-Catholic Church. The two influential figures from his youth, Jean Guitton and Père Hours, the one an intellectual and the other a political influence, have a curiously skewed and deceptive presence in his work.

Père Hours, politically committed to the Catholic Left, Althusser presents as an astute observer of political events, Jacobin and Gallican, anti-bourgeois. Hours provided Althusser with his 'earliest views on politics and the risks involved'.[127] And yet, Hours has an ambiguous role: militant in the Catholic Left and possessing a sharp political mind, he is both guilty of the vague solutions of the Church and yet provides the avenue for Althusser's own move to Marxism:

> In fact the Church, via its chaplains and encyclicals, made their own militants aware of the 'social question', of which most of us were *totally* ignorant. Of course, once we recognized that there was a 'social question' and that the remedies proposed were ridiculous, it did not take much, in my case the profound political vision of 'Père Hours', for us to explore what lay behind the wooly-minded slogans of the Catholic Church and rapidly convert to Marxism before joining the Communist Party![128]

Althusser claims that Hours's antithesis, Jean Guitton, passed on the fraudulent ability to pass off ignorance for knowledge purely through the form of the work. During the year that Guitton taught him at Lyon, Althusser learnt, after failing his first assignment, to write on the vaguest of topics with clarity and conviction:

> Soon after that we were set our first written essay. We wrote it in a large classroom where the older boys worked together after lessons. They were old hands and knew all the tricks of the trade. Guitton had given us the subject: '*Reality and fiction*'. I was struggling in vain to get a few vague ideas

---

[126] In this respect, I would merely be replicating the detailed biography of Moulier Boutang 1992, especially 99–171.

[127] Althusser 1994b, p. 95; Althusser 1992, p. 87.

[128] Althusser 1994b, p. 205; Althusser 1992, p. 197.

> into my head and again feeling completely lost when one of the older boys came up with some sheets of paper in his hand. 'Here, have these. They might help you. Anyway, they're on the same subject'.
>
> It was true; Guitton must have set the same subject the previous year and older boy mischievously gave me Guitton's own fair copy. I was certainly filled with shame but my despair was even greater. Without a moment's hesitation I took the teacher's fair copy, retained most of it (the overall plan, the development of the ideas, and the conclusion), and reworked it as best I could in my own way – in other words, what I had managed to grasp of Guitton's approach, including his style of writing. When Guitton gave the essays back to us in class, he seemed quite amazed and showered me with sincere praise. How had I made such progress in such a short time! I came top with seventeen out of twenty.[129]

The result: Althusser became the prize pupil, one of the few to gain access to the École normale supérieure, Guitton's favourite, all through a 'supreme act of deception and artifice'.[130] An allegory for the Church in Althusser's work and life? I suspect so, primarily because it did not lead to Althusser's despising Guitton. Rather, Guitton, the 'great philosopher' and Catholic, taught him two genuine scholarly virtues that remained with him: 'first, to strive for the greatest possible clarity when writing and, secondly, the art (artifice as always) of constructing and expounding an argument on any essay subject, *a priori* and as if by pure deduction, which was coherent and convincing'.[131] If the content and truth claims of the Roman-Catholic Church no longer held him, fading from his life and work, the form of the Church – here, specifically the form of its thought in all its scholastic rigour – remained fundamental to his intellectual life. But it was a form that was based on a deception, an allegory of the absent cause of the Church itself.

---

[129] Althusser 1994b, p. 92; Althusser 1992, p. 84.
[130] Althusser 1994b, p. 93; Althusser 1992, p. 85.
[131] Althusser 1994b, pp. 93–4; Althusser 1992, p. 86.

Chapter Four

The Heresies of Henri Lefebvre

Can I have been the last of the faithful?[1]

May '68, surrealism, Dada, class-war Punks, die Grünen, Parti Communiste Français, sex and, impossibly, religion, specifically dissident Roman-Catholic theology – these, among many other items, might begin to list the influences, both to and from, Henri Lefebvre. However delectable these various items might be, my concern is Lefebvre's continual negotiation of religion, specifically the strange ghost of Roman Catholicism and catholicity that continues to visit Lefebvre's work. As with Althusser, the fact that by 'religion' Lefebvre means ecclesiology of a specific sort, that the mark of the Church in his work may be designated 'catholicity' in the various senses I will explore below – all of this indicates the specific situation and trajectory of Marxist intellectuals in France before and after the Second World War. Like Althusser, there is a moment of profound religious commitment and involvement that is subsequently rejected. Also like Althusser, Lefebvre was a philosopher (among other things) and member of the PCF, although he did not stay as long. But Lefebvre's thought took a very different path, one that included mysticism, a lifelong emphasis on the theme of alienation in Marx's work and a predilection for the

[1] Lefebvre 1991, p. 221.

Hegelian side of Marx that eventually became anathema for Althusser but found a response among the Roman Catholics themselves (much to Lefebvre's chagrin). In fact, for all that they had in common, the two of them sit on either side of the see-saw: Althusser with his scientific, late Marx on one side and Lefebvre with his early humanist Marx, whose central idea is that of alienation, on the other.

Although I am suspicious of the trap of an assumed coherence of an individual life, almost all of Lefebvre's work is autobiographical in some sense, especially the key text of the 'mature' Lefebvre, coming from the extremely influential *Critique of Everyday Life* of 1947: 'Notes Written One Sunday in the French Countryside'.[2] This essay will become the hub of my analysis of Lefebvre and I offer a detailed exegesis and response to it in the bulk of this chapter.

The discussion of religion that we find here, running back to ancient Greece and its festivals and then focusing on the small country church near Navarrenx in the Pyrenées, wants to know why and how the Church can have such an influence, not only in society and politics at large but especially in his own life. The essay will lead me to consider other dimensions of his thought, especially the notions of alienation, space, women and everyday life, particularly in the way they seem to undermine his virulent polemic against the Church and show up contradictions in that engagement. I will also consider Lefebvre's distinct liking for heretical positions, including his earlier disavowed but radical mysticism, Jansenism, and the theological education he received from the dissident Roman-Catholic theologian, Maurice Blondel at the University of Aix-en-Provence.

Threshold

> And now let us go for a moment into the little village church, surrounded by its graveyard.[3]

At first sight, Lefebvre's rejection of the Church is more resolute than Althusser's, his hatred more entrenched and venomous. As far as Lefebvre is concerned, the Church – and he speaks specifically of the Roman-Catholic

---

[2] Lefebvre 1991, pp. 201–27.
[3] Lefebvre 1991, p. 213.

Church – is complicit with the alienation of capitalism. And, with the overcoming of alienation, a life-long project, the Church must be swept away with the bourgeoisie and the institutions of capitalism. I will return to the question of alienation below, but let me focus on the passionate essay for a while. I would like to imagine Lefebvre writing in a small notebook in the churchyard of his native village of Navarrenx, away in the country and on his own for a few moments soon after the end of the War. But I suspect that what passes for 'Notes' were, in fact, dictated on his return to Paris. The parenthetic remark, 'I forgot to check whether it [the vault decorated by an amateur painter with stars] is turned eastward towards Jerusalem and the sunrise',[4] suggests as much.

In the end, I am more interested in the form of this text, the various hints such a reading may reveal, but first let me summarise both the ostensible content and then the formal questions. The argument moves from a discussion of the rural cycles of peasant life, full of rhythm and balance, rich festivals and celebrations, to the disastrous effect of differentiation in terms of both property (the rise and dominance of wealthy landowners) and the organised religion of the Church. However gradual it may have been, both property and the Church come later, aliens in a landscape and society that would have been better off without them. But it is the Church that stands directly in the path of the storm of Lefebvre's polemic, and after the intimate pages where he satirises, mocks and demystifies the role of the Church in a peasant community like Navarrenx, he closes with the argument that Marxism provides the only answer to such a pervasive and asphyxiating alienation of everyday life.

As for the question of form, once he enters the church, it is as though the careful argument he has been building threatens to, and often does, get swamped by the passionate hatred of the Church. In these moments, he loses sight of the main argument, only returning to the question of alienation at the end of the essay. The first person pronoun dominates the pages,[5] to the extent of reciting some of his planned rebellions against the Church. Finally, the intense rush of his polemic can only be brought to a close by advocating Marxism in the conclusion. The contrast in style between the point form of Marxism's response and the running sentences and paragraphs (the last three

[4] Lefebvre 1991, p. 214.
[5] Lefebvre 1991, pp. 213–24.

full of ellipses) of the preceding tour of the small church has its own story to tell. By this time, Marxism and the Church could not be further apart.

I am, in fact, going to stay with the question of form for a while, returning to content at the close, for it seems to me that the content – the Roman-Catholic Church and religion more generally as a major element of alienation that only Marxism can overpower – begins to appear in a different light once the other signals of the text have been explored a little further. The overall structure that holds these 'notes' together is not the rhythm of rural life and festivals that he valorises so strongly in the opening pages; rather, the measured liturgical beat of a Roman-Catholic Sunday morning becomes the thread that renders the whole essay coherent at the same time that it reveals the inescapable presence of the Church in the way Lefebvre thinks and writes. From the churchyard (the impression is of the 44-year old Lefebvre seated outside the church before the worship service) where his imagination conjures up, in this sequence, the patterns of rural peasant life, the village itself, the churchyard, entry into the church, a tour of the dark interior and then the service, or mass, from the moment worshippers enter in response to the church bell to the vernacular sermon and then communion. Alongside the structural coherence of the liturgy, the other line of coherence is that of the autobiographical individual, much like Lukacs's argument in *Theory of the Novel*: the narrative of the hero, especially the coherent chronology of an individual life, holds together the disparate pieces of a disintegrating world. And what Lefebvre traces is the disintegrating effect of both capitalism and the organised religion of the Roman-Catholic Church. In this context, autobiography, especially the trajectory from Church to Marxism, attempts to hold everything together. As organising principles, both liturgy and autobiography work together, but they also generate the tensions of the narrative. For Lefebvre's own track away from the Church sets up the impassioned criticism that perpetually threatens to fire off in all sorts of directions. But it is precisely the spark between these two features, liturgy and autobiography, that makes the essay so fascinating.

I have already suggested that the liturgical structure of the text betrays a certain catholicity. So also at specific points in the text, the first of which is the crucial transition where he enters the church – 'And now let us go for a moment into the little church'.[6] I am going to give this 'humble, unadorned

[6] Lefebvre 1991, p. 201.

threshold' its full tropic weight, for it is also a threshold in his argument, a transition into a space in which he shifts gear. On one level, the whole existential tour of the church – a mode of writing that de Certeau in New York City or Jameson at the Bonventure in Los Angeles would replicate – is built upon and then undermines the way the faithful would enter a Roman-Catholic Church. For the pause on the threshold is initially one of reverence, a dipped knee and a hurried cross before passing into the sacred space. Not so Lefebvre: his pause is full of foreknowledge of what he will find, anger, disquiet, memories of childhood, and fascination.

> I hesitate on its humble, unadorned threshold, held back by a kind of apprehension. I know what I shall find: an empty, echoing space, with hidden recesses crammed with hundreds of objects, each uttering the silent cry that makes it a sign. What a strange power! I know that I cannot fail to understand their 'meanings', because they were explained to me years ago. It is impossible to close your eyes and your ears to these symbols: they occupy you, they preoccupy you immediately, insistent, insidious – and the more so for their simplicity. Already a feeling of disquiet, suppressed anger, mingled with the reluctant but tenacious memories of a childhood and adolescence shaped by Christianity.… And I know that this suppressed anger is another aspect of the power, the nascent fascination of the 'sacred' object. It is impossible to free myself from it. For me this space can never be just like any other space. But precisely because I feel this obscure emotion I can begin to understand its obscure causes. So I must not despair, the fight goes on.…[7]

For Lefebvre, it is the vacillation upon entry that gives him the possibility of fighting the extraordinary hold of the Church. And that fight involves a search for the causes of the Church's power, over himself and over French society, however difficult those causes may be to uncover. Thus, the silent signifying cry of the objects that clutter the inside of a Roman-Catholic church building, replete with meanings that are so well known to him, still have their power, a strange power, over him. In their simplicity, they saturate his thoughts, or, rather, feelings. However much he may attempt to blot them out, he cannot close his eyes and ears to them. But note the string of

[7] Lefebvre 1991, pp. 213–14.

negatives: 'I know that I cannot fail to understand'; 'It is impossible to close'; 'It is impossible to free myself from it'; 'For me this space can never be just like any other space'.[8] Cannot fail, impossible, never: the simple but telling point of the perpetual negative it that he protests too much, each resistance falling all too readily to the recognition of the Church's hold on him. He digs deep, finding with great difficulty the obscurity of both his emotions and their causes, buried in the damp niches and corners of this ancient building. Even the memories surface, reluctantly, despite his best efforts to excise them, the hidden recesses of the church crammed with hundreds of objects that now appear as an allegory for those memories. And the anger that he suppresses speaks too readily of the fact that he does in fact acknowledge the Church, for only when he neither feels hatred nor love could he truly say that he was free of the Church.

However, Lefebvre does keep a zone free of his explicit admission of the Church's hold. The whole paragraph that begins his tour of the small village church of his youth remains in the realm of emotional response, the feelings that the space and rituals of the church evoke. So, while he attempts to provide a reasoned description of the Church's power, he cannot help but show how much the emotional response remains in check, breaking out only to be reigned in time and again: 'Ah! Now here's something better, or more precise';[9] 'Sunday morning!';[10] 'A widow! It's a widow!';[11] 'I recognize you, despicable peace of my childhood! But what torments it takes to be free, just to destroy these ashes!';[12] 'What a combination – the art of fascination and the art of control';[13] 'How childish, simple and profound divine mystification is';[14] 'I mustn't get annoyed';[15] 'But how cold it all is, and how dried up!';[16] 'A caricature of humanity! Profound? Inner? No!'.[17] The 'threshold' of the little church is also the threshold of the argument as a whole, since from here on

[8] Ibid.
[9] Lefebvre 1991, p. 214.
[10] Lefebvre 1991, p. 218.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Lefebvre 1991, p. 219.
[13] Lefebvre 1991, p. 220.
[14] Lefebvre 1991, p. 221.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Lefebvre 1991, p. 222.
[17] Ibid.

the dark interior of the church draws out much more than can be contained within a reasoned argument.

Lefebvre has almost made it too easy for me to argue for the legacy of the Church, its spaces, symbols, emotional appeal. But what he cannot do is offer a reasoned analysis alone of the continued effects of the Church on his thoughts and acts. He attempts a curious balancing act, searching for the power of the Church, particularly the hold that it has upon him, and at the same time breaking out in vitriol against the Church. But what interests me here are the modes of refusal and rejection that Lefebvre employs.

Exploration

Apart from the threshold passage itself, there is the spatial move through the small church building, Lefebvre himself acting as part tour guide, part cultural critic on an ethnographic run, and part diarist revisiting the familiar. This spatial aspect of the essay begs an analysis in light of his famous distinction between spatial practice, spaces of representation and representation of space, but I will hold with that for a moment. Rather, the language itself interests me here, as it has in various ways until now. Apart from the first person narrative, the adjectives and nouns that race from Lefebvre's pen have their own emotive force: 'an empty, echoing space'; 'hidden recesses'; 'insistent, insidious'; 'obscure'; 'despair'; 'small and dark'; 'sickly light'; 'grimy little panes'; 'small, dark, mysterious'; 'smell of must and mould'; 'clumsy'; 'discoloured and worn'; 'the little human families which crawl along in this vale of tears'; 'sordid secrets'; 'fearful depths'; 'terrors', 'worries', 'misgivings' and 'despair'; 'frightened', 'tormented', 'anxieties', 'sufferings' and 'weakness'; 'inhuman' and 'craftiest'; 'history of human poverty'; 'massive dehumanization'; 'living monster'; 'craftily reticent manoeuvres'; 'double-dealing, treble-dealing'; 'empty abstraction'; 'threatening, domineering'; 'melancholy', 'childish' and 'decrepit'; 'unspeakably insipid, unspeakably dreary placidity'; 'faded'; 'stagnating' and 'falsely pious modesty'; 'distraught'; 'unutterably bored peacefulness'; 'contemptible'; 'despicable peace'; 'torments' and 'anguish'; 'lost illusions' and 'painful scar'; 'inevitable catastrophe'; 'bored to tears'; 'disguise'; 'secretions' and 'accumulated sediments'; 'childish' and 'simple'; 'burdened, sickened, poisoned, by the philter of the absolute, the venom of peace and the dreary peace of innocence'; 'mental torture'; 'little

authority'; 'weak chest'; 'meaningless weight'; 'comical'; 'cold' and 'dried up'; 'insipid symbol of infinity'; 'dreariness'; 'dehumanized beings'; 'fiendish' and 'terrible'; 'dubious'; 'facile' and 'comical'; 'extraordinarily naïve'; 'a dry, frigid theory'; and the ever-present damp and its smell.[18]

Hardly a list I would expect anyone to read in its entirety, but even skimming your eyes over it gives a distinct impression of the weight of Lefebvre's descriptors. He cannot be accused of restraint in his choice of words in order to speak of the church. The venom of the terms spills over from the church and runs onto the people, the villagers and farmers, and even his own reactions and rebellions. One of the clearest markers of the shift from the bench outside the church and the step over the threshold is in this terminological move, putting on show the sheer hatred that the Church draws from him.

But the venom is more concentrated in certain stretches when Lefebvre can hold himself back no longer. These burst out from a text that often at least attempts to give the Church its due, attempts to explicate as far as he can the power he admits the Church still has over him. Or rather, the essay holds two agendas in tension, one an effort to see how the Church works its spell and the other where he has had enough and lets the Church have it. The first agenda structures the tour through the building itself, after he has entered the threshold and before the next transition marked by the church bells and the beginning of worship.[19]

And so, in an evocation that eventually runs through all the senses – the sound of Latin and the vernacular, the sights of devotional items and figurines in the half-light, the touch of lips on St Anthony's toe, the taste of the Eucharist (at least for the priest), and the smell of damp and incense – he seeks out the Church's appeal and hold, however insidious it might be. It brings together familiar and strange, mystical and musty, exotic and mundane; and all of this purely in the mix of smells as he enters the church building.

The mundane and the transcendent mingle not only in the appealing smells of Lefebvre's small Catholic church, but also in the art work and manifold curios and devotional items scattered throughout. Whether the star-spangled blue border, summoning the cosmic order God has made, painted by

[18] Lefebvre 1991, pp. 213–23.
[19] Lefebvre 1991, pp. 214–18.

'a clumsy but inspired artist';[20] or the dim bald central lamp that evokes the sun or the Holy Spirit; or the patron saints Blasius (cattle) and Roch (sheep) in a chapel, surrounded by a rough painting threatened by patches of spreading damp, to whom the peasants offer a few burnt bristles from the tails of diseased cows; or St. Anthony's statuette with its toe worn and stained from kisses; or, in contrast to the aloof father, the immanence of Mary, who as both Mother and Virgin sums up 'the feminine totality' and would be a great goddess were it not for a wise and crafty theology that restricts her role to one of mediator; or the joining of heavenly family – two Fathers (one real and heavenly, the other…), a Mother and a Son – and the earthly families that come to visit and pay homage. Never far away, irony slips in every now and then, reinforcing the power of the multifarious links between heaven and earth. If we tasted it in his description of the starry border to the vault, or in the dim lamp that stands in for the sun, then it breaks forth in the description of God himself. The vindictive and justified power of the Father, tempered by the mild and brotherly son, threatens to come to pieces, parenthetically as it were; '(ah! the stories they tell in their pious conversations and their parish newspapers, of the host bleeding and speaking, of sudden deaths and unexpected conversions)'.[21]

Lefebvre can allow himself a moment or two of admiration in the midst of all of this, such as the attractive names for Mary (The Gates of Heaven, The Morning Star, the Ivory Tower and the Consolation of the Afflicted), or the ability of this small, ordinary building to 'offer us the world and the human drama in résumé',[22] along with history itself. But he has barely contained himself up until now, the small glimpses of irony and scorn breaking out in a paragraph that runs for almost two pages.

'O Church, O Holy Church, when I finally managed to escape from your control I asked myself where your power came from', he begins.[23] And with that he is off, the anger and scorn and fear all mingled in a rush that apparently leaves the Church no room in Lefebvre's communism whatsoever: 'Now I can see the fearful depths, the fearful reality of human alienation! O Holy Church, for centuries you have tapped and accumulated every illusion, every fiction,

---

[20] Lefebvre 1991, p. 214.
[21] Lefebvre 1991, p. 216.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

every vain hope, every frustration'.[24] The charges he levels at the Church? That it involves a large-scale deception, offers a totalising position that both absorbs all in its path and will brook nothing outside it, and that through such deception and totalisation it seeks to control human beings in every aspect of their lives.

On the first and third points – deception and control – Lefebvre pushes the line that with its sordid collection of secrets and lies, the Church has plied its trade through a range of tricks. In particular, the clergy brings to bear 'skills amassed over more than twenty centuries of experience'[25] in order to perpetuate the big lie with the ultimate aim of controlling peoples lives. From birth to death, life becomes one long run of terrors, worries, hopes and despair; the clergy takes advantage of people in moments of doubt, fear or anxiety to insinuate its message. The grand narrative of the human drama in the context of world history becomes a litany of oppression and repression.

On these points, Lefebvre reiterates the old Enlightenment criticism of superstition and deception, and he comes very close to the position on ideology that Althusser finds unacceptable. For Althusser, ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. The key to this definition is that there are two removes from the 'real conditions': the representation and the imaginary relations. Althusser seeks to counter the mistaken assumption that ideology is an imaginary way of conceiving one's real conditions of existence. At this level, there is only one stage, one step from reality to ideology: ideology is, therefore, an illusion, does not correspond to reality (belief in God, justice, etc.), but it does allude to reality. This is the level at which Lefebvre seems to operate. The task of interpretation is then to cut through the illusion, pick up the allusions and locate the reality behind this imaginary representation. Althusser identifies various types of interpretation – the mechanistic (God is the imaginary representation of the king or despot) and the hermeneutic (Church Fathers, Feuerbach, Karl Barth etc.), in which the imaginary inversion of ideology need only be set on its feet in order to discover the real source.

As to why people need to do such a thing, i.e., make an imaginary transposition in order to represent their real conditions of existence to themselves,

---

[24] Ibid.
[25] Lefebvre 1991, p. 217.

there have been two standard answers. First a group of cynical priests and despots have constructed these lies so that people will serve them in the belief that they are serving God. Second, this imaginary representation is a result of human alienation (Feuerbach and Marx): human beings therefore construct an imaginary and alienated realm in order to deal with such alienation in their real lives. Lefebvre seems to be guilty of taking up both positions at once, cynical priests and alienation itself. I am going to return to the whole question of alienation later, especially in light of my argument in the preceding chapter that Althusser threw out too much, both means and ends, on the question of alienation. So let me stay with the cynical-priest option: on this argument, a religious text or institution or doctrine is produced by a religious and scribal élite who uses such materials to give expression to the ideological assumptions of that group of writers: priests will then produce documents with priestly concerns, men will produce documents with male interests, political groups will put forward their own propaganda. Lefebvre comes perilously close to the position that the Church is made up of a clique, a group of ideological manipulators who seek to dupe their opponents and/or the masses into following them. In other words, he understands religion, or more specifically the Church, as an instance of unmediated ideology, to use Althusser's terms, as the imaginary representation of the real conditions of existence, without any mediation.

It seems to me that Lefebvre is guilty on all counts. And yet, this characterisation of the Church as a clique of cynical manipulators is not, in the end, what really gets to him. The problem with the Church is that it lays a total claim on any individual: 'he who is not for me is against me' becomes the claim that Christianity provides a complete and closed system that excludes any other. As with any analysis that starts with form, content must return, as it already has in my discussion for some time now. What we find here, in other words, is a clash of the Titans, Christianity and Marxism being the great totalising systems that have become in their own times state ideologies like no other.[26] Again and again in these pages, Lefebvre picks up the strategies of totalisation: 'O Holy Church, for centuries you have tapped and accumulated every illusion, every fiction, every vain hope, every frustration. You have garnered them in your houses like some precious harvest, and each generation,

[26] Lefebvre 1991, pp. 216–18.

each era, each age of man adds something new to them'.[27] Absorbing every possible position like some great sponge, both the strategies of control and deception that I discussed above become aspects of this totalisation. The definition of the Church is then that it 'is nothing more and nothing less than the unlimited ability to absorb and accumulate the inhuman'.[28]

Lefebvre, however, is not speaking of Christianity *per se*, but the Church, particularly the Roman-Catholic Church. I will continue to insist on the specificity of the existential tour through the rural church building at Navarrenx: it is a French Roman-Catholic church. And Lefebvre's relationship to it is contradictory. One the one hand, there is the half-recognised power that the Church still exerts over him, and the need to explain and negate that power, while on the other there are his unacknowledged and unpaid-for debts to that Church. Let me lay out some of those debts.

Firstly, as with Althusser, he perpetuates in his rejection the claim of the Roman-Catholic Church to universality: it is the 'Catholic' Church, a term first used in the early centuries of the Common Era not for inclusion but for exclusion and division. The 'Holy Catholic Church' of the early Christian creeds is one that refused entry to various heretics such as the Arians, Donatists and all manner of Gnostics. Let alone the great division with the Orthodox Churches over the date of Easter. Too often, the underlying assumption of the 'Catholic Church' is the theological doctrine of the Church Universal, the vast panoply of divisions and denominations still united under one faith, now embodied in the World Council of Churches (minus for many years the Roman Catholics). But, as I will argue in my discussion of Gramsci, the universality or catholicity of the Roman Catholic Church is not one of ecumenism but of exclusion. And this shows through in Lefebvre's own polemic, for he assumes the universality of the highly specific Roman-Catholic Church.

Secondly, the very description of the Church as an absorbing and rampaging monster growing ever larger the more it consumes still presupposes, for all its negativity, a 'catholicity' that takes the notion to its logical extreme. Thirdly, he speaks not of Christianity but of the Church. This is both an astute observation of the necessarily institutional nature of Christianity itself, but it also cannot move past the Roman-Catholic doctrine of 'no salvation outside

[27] Lefebvre 1991, p. 216.
[28] Lefebvre 1991, p. 217.

the Church'. In this respect, the Church lays a total claim upon people: should you choose to join, then we expect complete submission, obedience and faithfulness. What is more, rather than being forced, you will *want* to do all of this (the ultimate success of ideology, as Althusser pointed out). Finally, and following on from this, the rejection of the Church can only be one of total rejection. No half-measures, no polite promises to remain friends, for Lefebvre the departure must be final, the earth scorched behind him so that there can be no turning back. But, in doing so, he perpetuates still the 'catholicity' of his perception and experience of the Church.

In this scenario, the Church must depart the scene on which Marxism is emerging: the premiere agent of dehumanisation and alienation, the Church will dissipate with the overturning of alienation that Marxism promises. For Lefebvre, it is either all or nothing. And the signs of such demise he sees in the Roman-Catholic engagement with Marx and in Catholic Action, which was to exercise such an ambiguous attraction for Louis Althusser. Although he does not name anyone in particular, Lefebvre's reference is clear. For Lefebvre, the appropriation of Marx is the craftiest and most daring of all the Church's subtle efforts at control: 'And now you have the gall to take up the cause of Man, promising to turn yesterday's slave into tomorrow's master! No. The trick is too obvious, and above all the task is too great'.[29]

The catch is that, for all his polemic, it was precisely thinkers on the Catholic Left that engaged with Lefebvre, both drawing from him and criticising his work. The battle was over the humanism of Marx's 1844 manuscripts, for this was common territory for Lefebvre and his collaborators such as Norbert Guterman on the one hand, and various Roman-Catholic thinkers on the other, especially Gaston Fessard, Jean Daniélou, and Henri de Lubac.[30] Each of these Roman-Catholic thinkers sought both to combat and appropriate Lefebvre's Hegelian and romanticist Marxism. The crucial texts were *Morceaux choisis*, a selection from Marx's early writings edited by Lefebvre and Guterman in 1934,[31] and their *La Conscience mystifiée* of 1936[32] in which they attempted to broaden the concept of alienation in terms of mystification. Already in the latter book, the polemic against the Church appears. Lefebvre and Guterman

[29] Ibid.
[30] See further Curtis 1997, especially: pp. 151–84.
[31] Lefebvre and Guterman 1934.
[32] Lefebvre and Guterman 1936.

attack the Church as anti-humanist, as an expression of mystified consciousness and the cause of further mystification, and as a false solution to the contradictions and problems of human existence. Marxism is, by contrast, the true humanism, providing 'la force d'une religion… sans être une religion'.[33] Marxism could deliver on the promise of Christianity through its notion of 'l'homme total', for Christianity was part and parcel of the alienation that must be swept away.

Fessard, Daniélou and de Lubac respond in different ways. Whereas Fessard argued that the early Marx was not dialectical enough and used Lefebvre's arguments against vulgar Marxism, Daniélou sought a way between Catholic thought and the humanist faith of Lefebvre and Guterman. De Lubac took a different tack, stressing the shortcomings of abandoning ontological transcendence in favour of an absolute temporalism, which he traced back to the earliest point of Marx's atheism, his *Theses on Feuerbach*. In each case, these Roman-Catholic thinkers found significant value in Marxism and sought to incorporate its insights into theology. That they did so through Lefebvre seems to have horrified him, and left him a little nonplussed.

Lefebvre is not sure which way to go here, for, on the one hand, he hopes that this is the big contradiction that will lead to the Church's undoing, attempting to combine the liberating drive of Marxism itself with the comprehensive lie of the Church. Is this one trick too far? On the other hand, he knows that the Church has been adept at adapting, absorbing and transforming all that it encounters. The secret of its success has been this vast syncretistic enterprise, and so all he can do is close with a question: 'So what is to become of this accumulation of every conceivable myth and empty abstraction, of this extraordinary apparatus which combines the flaws of every State that ever was without even the virtue of some connection to the life of any one people or any one nation'?[34] In other words, will Marxism oversee the demise of the Church, or will the Church absorb Marxism?

---

[33] Lefebvre and Guterman 1936, p. 58.
[34] Lefebvre 1991, pp. 217–18.

Worship

I want to hold my discussion of the relation between the Church and Marxism, the over-riding theme of the essay, until a little later, for there is a third phase of his entry and presence within the little church building where reasoned analysis jostles with polemic. Most of the careful analysis comes in the irony-sprinkled effort to understand the appeal of the worship service, or mass, and I will stay with that for a moment before turning back to consider the obligatory perusal of worshippers as they arrive, where again Lefebvre's ire gets the better of him.

What of the mass, that distinctly Roman-Catholic form of worship yet with a recognisable general structure? Prayers, singing, sermon, Eucharist, give or take a couple of things, especially the underlying theological justification for certain items and not others. Lefebvre suggests we may read this flawed event as both more than and less than a tragedy, with protagonist (priest), audience (congregation), choir, and community's founder who comes to a gruesome end only to revive himself and the community. More than? Here, he allows perhaps the most scope, searching for the uncanny appeal and versatility of the mass: 'What a poetic drama, where anyone watching who is not insensitive or immune is challenged, gripped if only by the style and flow of imagery – forced to participate, drawn on by the senses even into the realm of theological meanings'![35] And this appeal works its mystique all the way from the magnificence of a high mass in a cathedral to the lowest mass of bench and upturned crate. Less than tragedy? In the mock tone of a theatre review, Lefebvre cites all that dissipates the power of the mass, lost in the clutter of centuries: abstractions, symbols, gestures, language, the net weight of which is to sink worship itself in unrelieved boredom.

Boredom would have to be the quintessential state of the pew sitter, particularly through the sermon. Perhaps the best way to read the ruminations that follow, the sprinkling of Latin phrases along with Lefebvre's free associating reflection, is as a way to deal with boredom in the worship service itself, especially the sermon (the only part of the worship service in Lefebvre's little church that was in French). Various triggers set off Lefebvre's run of thoughts, a compilation of wily Jews, pikes and infantry, Judith and Holofernes, youth

[35] Lefebvre 1991, p. 220.

and the Word itself. Now and then he chides himself for inattention – 'But hush! We mustn't be flippant. Pay attention.… I mustn't get annoyed'.[36] But all of this is not yet the Eucharist, for which the sermon is but the lead-up in a Roman-Catholic mass.

And here, with the close of worship and the nearby close of the argument as a whole, Lefebvre finally returns to the thesis with which he began, namely the gradual alienation generated by the Church's appropriation of the rural festivals. But I began my analysis of his essay at midpoint, at the moment of crossing the threshold into the church itself and into a different stage of his argument. There has been little sense of the overall argument of the essay in the section I have considered (Lefebvre's existential tour). In fact, apart from the references to alienation, there has been no connection made with the earlier phase of the argument until now. What is wrong with the climax of the mass, the Eucharist? All that had life, enjoyment, warmth and vitality seems to have been sapped out of the meal. There is, for Lefebvre, no community apart from one that is fictitious and abstract. The introspection, false piety, absorption in dreariness, dryness and coldness that characterises the participants in the Eucharist is not even in the same ball park as the enthusiasm, overflowing cups of wine and beer, never-ending food and the sensual pleasure of eating and drinking. Lefebvre wants the Eucharist to be just that, a celebration (the meaning of the Greek word *eucharistein*), full of pump and energy and food and drink and community: 'Where are the overflowing cups and the huge, consecrated loaves of bread'?[37] But he is not going to get any of it, for it has systematically been milked out of the Christian sacred meal.

Archaeology

With the close of worship via the high point of the Eucharist we come back to Lefebvre's main argument in this essay, and the moment of content proper. Which is that in rural, peasant communities dating back to ancient Greece and Rome, there was a rhythm of life and community, determined in large part by the agricultural season itself, that had an extraordinary balance and harmony. Honed over centuries of experience, the annual patterns of life

[36] Lefebvre 1991, p. 221.
[37] Lefebvre 1991, p. 222.

both respected and took licence from the all-determining nature all around them. As far as Lefebvre is concerned, life in a contemporary French village (he writes in 1945) has not changed much from ancient Greece.

Or, rather, it hangs on, degraded and impoverished, overlaid with the alienating effects of social differentiation and organised religion, what Lefebvre will call the social mystery. The brief pages on the village[38] squeezed in between the far-ranging utopian speculation of rural balance and the vitriol directed at the Church, actually form the crux of the essay as a whole. It is a very Hegelian argument, moving in the pattern of the undifferentiated to differentiation, and then through to a resolution in utopia; hence his fascination with the pastoral idyll. If the section on the Church, with its mixed effort to understand and condemn, presents the causes of alienation, and if the evocation of bucolic balance holds out an un-alienated state, then the village itself provides the link between these two other parts. In effect, what Lefebvre does here is undertake a cultural and spiritual archaeology of the village he sees before him, a projection backwards and forwards that seeks both the appeal of the rural French village and attempts to deal with its gradual decline. There are two aspects to this archaeological effort, the one based on a notion of uneven development and the other on a theory of relics or survivals. If social and cultural development is uneven, if some parts follow a different path or move more slowly, then it becomes possible to compare a select contemporary social formation with one or more of the past. In social-scientific approaches to the ancient Near East and the Bible (material with which I am most familiar), anthropological research from so-called 'primitive' societies is used to develop hypotheses concerning ancient societies and make sense of some of the textual material. Closely related to this is the notion of survivals, in which one may find traces of earlier social, political and cultural practices in contemporary societies. In his unnamed village, the alienation of social differentiation and religion has not completely obliterated the older practices that he values so much. In order to get there, he lifts various layers of alienation in order to uncover the ideal community beneath: the myth of the community and its dead, the winter solstice festival now overlaid with Christmas, spring festivals with their relics of Dionysius and Hecate now sapped of any joy

[38] Lefebvre 1991, pp. 210–13.

and celebration, the degradation of sacrifice and charity into 'spiritual' investments, and the ancient gestures and rituals, now dead and without meaning.

The notion of relics, half-buried under contemporary forms, has another more suggestive shape in Lefebvre's work. The idea itself can either focus on the remnants of the past lodged at various points in the strata of the present, or one can focus on the transformations wrought on earlier bits and pieces by a particular mode of production. It is this second perspective that Lefebvre stresses in discussing the differences between serious belief in Christianity (or occultism, spiritualism, vegetarianism or a particular moral code) and the absence of such seriousness in regard to Greek gods such as Apollo or Venus. Except that artists and lovers will invoke Apollo and Venus far more often than God, or Jesus or the Holy Spirit. The reason? The heterogeneous way in which capitalism appropriates and transforms so many elements from different modes of production: 'capitalist society brings with it all kinds of outdated forms which it raises to a "modern level"'.[39] In fact, the uniqueness of capitalism is not the invention of new cultural and economic items – such as patriarchies or money or religion or the detached bourgeois house and other necessary items – but the transformation and combination of those that already exist.

Lefebvre is no sociological slouch, having made some of the first forays that would establish rural sociology as a discipline in itself. I am going to be more critical of his arguments concerning the development of religion, but it seems to me that, for all its archaeological form, the depiction of rural balance is less an image of the past than a utopian possibility for the future. Only when he invokes Marxism at the close of the essay does the dangerously romantic[40] and regressive bucolic landscape establish itself as a version of socialism. In other words, the fullness of life, the risk of the festivals that challenged nature in their very excess, are all part of an ideal image that I want to suggest functions less as a picture of past than as a utopian image of the future under communism. This is Lefebvre's 'primitive communism' (even though it is very much a feudal picture), the rudiments of a way of life that would find their fulfilment in the demise of capitalism. Here, he draws nigh to Bloch's utopian

[39] Lefebvre 1991, p. 191.

[40] Other Marxists were wont to take Lefebvre to task for his romanticism (see Lefebvre 1991, pp. 54–5).

hermeneutic, perpetually seeking utopian hints in material of past and present. Only with the emergence of wealth and property, the wealthy landowner who always was more generous than anyone else at the annual festivals, does division and inequality begin to appear: differentiation begins to overtake the earlier undifferentiated state. These are the first stages of what will become capitalism, but it is not clear whether Lefebvre means the feudal social hierarchy or the first signs of capitalism. In order to avoid the problem of distinguishing, his evocation of ancient Greece recalls a much earlier moment of political economics.

Lefebvre will raise his hand and acknowledge a romantic and utopian image of ancient Greece. Thus, in *Introduction to Modernity*, he quotes his own *The New Athens*:

> Athenian democracy, besmirched by slavery, incomplete but real, the cause and effect of freedom, disappeared only with independence. Athens, as a city-state, was neither the most nor the least important power of its age. The Athenian Republic could not equal the mighty Persia, but it outclassed the little towns and ports of Sporades and the Mediterranean. Around it were grouped many towns, created or protected by the Athenians. Right up until they ceased to exist politically they were able to be intensely active in commerce, philosophy and science. They circulated their ideas with their merchandise and their money with their logic, the money of the mind. If they were not the greatest by virtue of their power (and Alexandria, then Rome, vanquished them), they were so by virtue of their spirit. It is probably to them that we owe the (rather unclear) concepts of spiritual greatness. In so far as we are able to understand them, the Athenians' relations with one another combined a certain gentleness and practical rationality with a great deal of energy, vitality and courage; if they knew how to enjoy their life in their own homes, they were also able to defend their city, and their sometimes excessive urbanity did not restrain them from acting on occasions with regrettable violence, nor did it soften their obstinate will to power. Nevertheless their guilt and brutality fade away as soon as we fall under the spell of their social life, which successfully combined charm with the austere quest for truth. Is there no place in the modern world for the New Athens and the New Greece, a country which would be neither too large or too small, which would be able to stand on its own two feet, and where courage and sophistication would be combined? Is not our working class

> the most gifted in the world in terms of knowing how to get the best out of life? It is not easily fooled. The proletarians of France know that man does not live simply to get the best out of life; they know that to live one must work, and to live well one must work well. Their social practices seem to bring back the bourgeois skills of the eighteenth century: the art of happiness, an intelligent Epicureanism, an art of sensual enjoyments. They couldn't give a damn for materialist philosophy as such. They have learned their social practices with enormous good nature, reasonably – like the Greeks, without excess, without going over the top – and spontaneously. Above all, we must never burden them with heroism, or productivism, or science, or political action: that would compromise what they have achieved and held on to. For perhaps it is they who will reconstitute passionate, concrete reason. Perhaps it is they who will rediscover the secret of a lost harmony, the secret of an education which would train individuals in the art of living and which would control technology, the secret of a moderate humanism, without megalomaniacs and without giants, one which has as its aim the fulfillment of individual life.…[41]

I have quoted this at length, since the contrast with his depiction of the Church could not be sharper. His own comment on this earlier image says it all: 'Yes, it's all a dream, a romantic, utopian version of that classic myth, the myth of the New Greece'.[42] But he also claims that 'Greece, the original source, offers the only ideal and the only idea of man's possibilities'.[43] For Lefebvre would like to hold on to the image of Athens as an image for the proletariat, something to strive for in the everyday struggles of class conflict.

In the essay contained in *Critique of Everyday Life*, he calls up a slightly different image of ancient Greece, no less romantic, no less utopian (however qualified). This time, it not so much Athens as the rural landscapes and villages, the undifferentiated pastoral idyll that become an ideal origin now lost before the onslaught of the Church and of capitalism. The phrases he uses are telling: we can, with the assistance of precise documents 'travel back in our minds to the origins of civilization' to the 'dawn of Greek civilization'

---

[41] Lefebvre 1995, pp. 86–7; see also pp. 226–8.
[42] Lefebvre 1995, p. 87.
[43] Lefebvre 1995, p. 226.

and 'conjure up this country life'.[44] And the assumption is that such a life has remained, by and large, unchanged through Greek, Roman, medieval and capitalist eras. Of course, this is not quite the case, but let us allow Lefebvre his utopian image for a moment or two.[45]

Here, we find peasants living in close and disciplined harmony with a natural environment (but has it not been fundamentally transformed in a Europe that has only two per cent of its land surface not fundamentally altered by human action?) that keeps them at a risky subsistence level. In the context of this life, always at the mercy of a nature that would determine the extent of the last season's crops, Lefebvre focuses on the festivals in which the people would throw all of their caution to the wind. In one festival day, they would use up the carefully accumulated supplies of food and drink, putting themselves at the mercy of a winter in the face of which they engaged in an orgy of food, alcohol and sex. With the barest nod to village idiocy (as he must have found in his own village), Lefebvre sets up an image of poor, rough and jovial peasants for whom nature, with all of fears and desires, was essentially joyful. If there was any religion, it was inextricably tied to nature, a collection of spells and rituals and a sense of mysterious powers that bound nature and community together.

Invoking his pioneering work in the development of rural sociology, he argues for a disciplined and subtle balance of rural life, ranging from the amount of pastures, forests and arable land to the number of children that could be born in any one year. Even though he recognises that 'at only very rare moments and places in history has it [peasant life] achieved a successful, happy, balanced form',[46] the placement of such a concession after seven pages of description of this imagined rural life is more telling. For what he will narrate now, in classic Hegelian fashion, is the breakdown of the fine balance, brought about by social differentiation and inequality along with the abstractions of religion – sacred form, symbol and sign – out of the rituals first used to maintain and celebrate life.

If the development of a rural aristocracy and then a rural bourgeoisie, with the attendant rise of private property, gradually dissipated and destroyed

---

[44] Lefebvre 1991, p. 201.
[45] See also Lefebvre 1995, pp. 147–9.
[46] Lefebvre 1991, p. 207.

peasant communities through the reification of social relations, then the development of social mystery, or religion, becomes the prime form of alienation through abstraction. The living relations among human beings become abstracted, replaced by the signs and symbols of organised religion. I cannot help but notice the deeper narrative in all of this that evokes the Fall of Genesis 2–3, one that engaged Bloch, Benjamin and Althusser as well. Here, we find human beings in an ideal state of nature, balanced and in touch with themselves and their surroundings, until that Edenic state breaks down by means of the intrusion of new and foreign beliefs and practices. Except that the Genesis narrative reveals something about Lefebvre's own argument that might be described as the flaw in the crystal, the less than perfect Golden Age that is constitutive of that age itself. In the same way that, in the midst of the garden of Eden, are the two trees, one of the knowledge of good and evil and the other of life, that Adam and Eve are forbidden to touch, so also the possibility for social differentiation and the development of religion lies within the balanced rural community.

The simultaneous growth of technical progress and social differentiation is built into the very system of festivals that Lefebvre has so lovingly described. A major aspect of participation in the community, the avoidance of bad luck, the continuation of natural and human fertility involves gifts and sacrifices. Festivals ensured and assured the future, and so the generosity of the giver, the size of the gift itself, entailed greater blessings. A large festival gift from a wealthy member of the community would be seen as a gift to the community itself: 'Thus through their gifts to the community, the wealthy (once private property had become differentiated) could make their wealth accepted, and were able to consolidate it'.[47] Here lies the paradox of this part of the 'Fall', for in the process of strengthening the community itself the increasingly powerful landowners destroyed it.

As for the move from magic to religion, Lefebvre not only relies on an evolutionary model of religious development, valorising the early over against the later form, but he relates it directly to the emergence of social differentiation. Thus, once the social process was obscured by the rise of wealthy and powerful individuals – it now seemed as though they were responsible for the

[47] Lefebvre 1991, p. 204.

community's well being – religion could develop out of magic, realise magic's deeper logic and yet replace it:

> The developing social mystery – the reality which escaped men's consciousness, although they were its authors and actors – was destined to become a religious mystery; and religion now superimposed itself upon magic, but without destroying it.[48]

At first sight, the connection between social differentiation and the abstractions of religion seems odd. For what Lefebvre apparently narrates is the gradual emergence of capitalism in Europe: thus social differentiation is one aspect of the commodification of commercial life and the reification of cultural and social relations. But then the argument that 'religion' – his model is, as would be expected, Roman-Catholic Christianity – appears as part of the whole process of social differentiation is absurd. However, Lefebvre is a little more cagey than that, for he does not want to tie the process down so neatly. What he tries to do here is identify a more general process, heavily reliant on Hegel, that undoes the much-desired rural balance. So, social differentiation and religion emerge in ancient Greece, in tribal situations (the rise of chiefs), feudalism (kings and a highly stratified society) and capitalism.

It seems to me that he is on stronger ground with his notion of social differentiation than he is with his theory of the beginnings of religion. It would be easy to pull his argument to pieces: structured religion does not necessarily replace its forerunner magic; there is no evolutionary path from inchoate animism through mythical heroes, polytheism and then monotheism; nor is there a path from the concrete experiences of everyday to abstractions of the great religions; religion's social causes cannot so easily be connected with social differentiation, especially in the temporal model Lefebvre puts forward. But what is more interesting is the function of this narrative of the Fall from the utopian image of rural communities. The Fall of such a community is a necessary narrative device, both for Genesis and for Lefebvre's essay. As has been well argued in regard to Genesis but applies just as much to Lefebvre, if we are to have any narrative at all, any history of redemption or indeed the possibility of Marxism itself, then the Fall must take place.

---

[48] Lefebvre 1991, p. 208.

And it is the arrival of Marxism at the close of the essay that carries out so many functions for Lefebvre. I have already noted the formal function of the final pages in bringing, in an ordered series of points, the rush of anger against the Church to a close. Lefebvre says as much, seeking to summarise what the 'dialectical method can bring to such chaos' – the chaos in question being not merely the alienation perpetuated by the Church but also that produced by his rage and rebellions. Further, the appearance of Marxism at the end makes sense of the ten pages of utopian rural harmony with which he opens these 'Notes'. The earlier reflections then become an effort to glimpse the possibilities of a social world without alienation, without antagonism and class conflict (the negatives themselves are part of the difficulty of imaging such a world). But it becomes more than that in the final words of the essay, where Lefebvre puts Marxism squarely in the place of 'religion': attempts the extraordinarily difficult task of recreating everyday life, 'life in its smallest, most everyday detail',[49] which then allows it to 'resolve the problem of life itself'.[50] Or, if I may repeat the quotation I drew a little earlier from *La Conscience mystifiée*, Marxism provides 'the force of a religion… without being a religion'.[51]

What we get here in the last breath of his reflections is the final clash of the great totalising systems:

> Human culture and consciousness incorporate every conquest, every past moment of history. In contrast, religion *accumulates* all man's helplessness. It offers a critique of life; it is itself that critique: a reactionary, destructive critique. Marxism, the consciousness of the new man and the new consciousness of the world, offers an effective, constructive critique of life. And Marxism alone![52]

Lefebvre reiterates his earlier argument concerning the all-consuming syncretism of what he now openly and ambiguously calls 'Catholicism'.[53] Further, not only does the Church, as a movement, a social and political organism, assimilate all that comes in its path while appealing to dogma and appearing to resist change, it also permeates everyday life. This is, for Lefebvre,

---

[49] Lefebvre 1991, p. 226.
[50] Lefebvre 1991, p. 227.
[51] Lefebvre and Guterman 1936, p. 58.
[52] Lefebvre 1991, p. 227.
[53] Lefebvre 1991, p. 224.

the location of the Church's greatest power and also where Marxism's hardest task lies. Lefebvre suggests that this domination of everyday life is the result of both the various rituals, monumental buildings, vast organisation and finance, state power and even the abstract theory, as well as the well rehearsed psychological and moral technique. I am not so sure, for this smacks all too much of a sinister plot by cynical priests; but I think he is on a much better track with the suggestion itself that in 'every act of one's immediate life, no matter how insignificant, religion can be present'.[54]

Heresies

In fact, it seems to me that here, on the question of everyday life, lie the beginnings of a more positive reading of religion in Lefebvre's work. And such a reading is possible, I would suggest, because of the abiding influence of certain forms of theological thought. I refer here to the collection of heresies with which he begins to close his discussion of the 'Notes Written One Sunday Afternoon'. In what follows, then, I will first speak of those heresies before passing on to the more positive elements of religion that I would like to retrieve from his work.

The penultimate moment of Lefebvre's Sunday notes, before the invocation of Marx, speak of his various rebellions against the Church, thoughts triggered by the Eucharist and functioning as his own way of closing the worship service. For him, the desire to gather his own assortment of heresies was 'just another way of *perpetuating mystical themes*'; it showed all the signals of 'one of the last believers'.[55] In other words, his various rebellions were part of the logic of the Church itself, for which it had developed a series of terms such as apostasy, prodigal son, and the cunning of the devil. You cannot escape that easily, as Lefebvre recognised in anguish.

Lefebvre's predilection for heresies was something he did not, despite his claims to the contrary, leave behind with a rebellious youth. In the 'Notes from Navarrenx' he writes of his planned heresy of the Holy Ghost, 'an indestructible, indigestible heresy with which to torpedo the Church'.[56] Picking

[54] Lefebvre 1991, p. 225.
[55] Lefebvre 1991, p. 223.
[56] Ibid.

up this neglected member of the Trinity, he planned to become the prophet of the Holy Ghost, fostering a cult as intense and widespread as those of Mary or Jesus. The motive: hatred and an over-riding desire for revenge. When this turned out to be a little too clerical, he reverted to his favoured ancient Greece, seeking out a Dionysiac celebration of the cyclical birth and death of the cosmos, now on a vast Nietzschean scale that would, in its intensity of passion, far surpass anything in Christianity. Christ and Zarathustra would be absorbed into a 'superhuman Celebration'.[57]

Lefebvre cannot be accused of half measures. We are supposed to believe that these heresies belong to the moment of his adolescence, but he is fudging things a little, trying to put such things into a time when he could see in a glass only darkly. Rather, his writings show a continuous compilation of heresies. Indeed, nearly all the possibilities he was to entertain throughout his life appear in allusions and word-triggers in the central essay I have been favouring throughout this chapter. So, let us see what those allusions might be.

To begin with, while outlining his two rebellions – the cult of the Holy Ghost and the Dionysiac Celebration – he mentions in passing that he 'studied the history of the Church'.[58] I will deliberately over-read this phrase in order to consider his time at the University of Aix-en-Provence and the teaching of the Roman-Catholic modernist theologian Maurice Blondel. As for 'perpetuating mystical themes',[59] there was also a period in which he was enamoured with mysticism. His close collaborator on the first translations of Marx's early writing into French, Norbert Guterman, later turned to cabbalism. Secondly, the cryptic 'Jansen's?'[60] bears with it a whole regional weight from his home town, apart from the heretical history of a theological position that has most in common with that other French theologian, Jean Calvin. And then the heresy of the Holy Ghost itself has echoes of Joachim de Fiore, the twelfth-century millenarian and mystic who foresaw the inauguration of the third era of history, that of the Spirit, in 1260 CE.

---

[57] Lefebvre 1991, p. 224.
[58] Lefebvre 1991, p. 222.
[59] Lefebvre 1991, p. 223.
[60] Ibid.

Blondel

> I studied the history of the Church.[61]

Suffering from respiratory problems in a damp, cold, World-War-One Paris, Lefebvre went to study for a *Licence* in Philosophy at the Catholic University of Aix-en-Provence. It was 1918, he was seventeen, and Maurice Blondel was already 57. Although he was to live for another 31 years, he already gave Lefebvre the impression of 'un petit chat très vieux'.[62] Blondel had a history of radical and dissident theology, having been part of the modernist movement in the Roman-Catholic Church condemned by Pope Pius X in 1907. As Shields notes, Lefebvre found himself switching from the technical and engineering training of Paris to a full dose of Roman-Catholic theology, albeit somewhat heretical.[63]

Blondel's great interest, especially at the time Lefebvre was at Aix-en-Provence, was in the question of volition as the key to one's experience and knowledge of God. Even though he later allowed more room for abstract conceptions and methodological arguments in theology (partly to stay within the Church), especially in the rational proofs for the existence of God, he remained true to his emphasis on volition. And he had established this position in his early and condemned work *L'Action* (1893),[64] in which he argued, through a philosophical analysis of action, that the human will at the basis of action can never attain satisfaction or completion since its desire is never fulfilled by any finite or contingent good. It is this incompleteness, the lack at the heart of the human will, that points to God in a teleological fashion (the echoes of Bloch's utopian argument should not be missed here). In what might be called the argument from volition, Blondel modified the traditional arguments for the existence of God, particularly the ontological proof of Anselm (God is that than which nothing greater can be thought). Reshaping the traditional arguments concerning grace, Blondel argued that God imposes himself on the will as the first principle and the last term and we can only 'opt' for him or against him. This obscure and experiential affirmation of God is the condition for any

---

[61] Lefebvre 1991, p. 222.
[62] Lefebvre 1989 [1959], p. 359.
[63] Shields 1999, p. 9. What Shields does not do, frustratingly, is provide a sense of the theology Blondel was teaching.
[64] Blondel 1984.

knowledge of God. Blondel pushes the paradox of determinism and free will to its extreme: while the stress on grace comes close to Calvin or Jansen, the more God imposes his grace, the more volition comes in to play.

How is Blondel's work heretical? For a time Blondel was part of the 'Modernist Movement' in the Roman-Catholic Church at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For those unfamiliar with ecclesial history and theology, the notion of modernism within the Church strikes an odd note: is this not a question of culture, literature, architecture, and so on, rather than theology? The modernists sought to bring into the Roman-Catholic Church the by now well-established directions of modern biblical studies and theology common in Protestant scholarship along with a slight whiff of democratic church government. Although condemned by the wary and conservative Pius X in 1907 after the toleration of Leo XIII, some of its leaders excommunicated like Alfred Loisy and George Tyrell, others moving outside the orbit of the Church such as Friedrich von Hugel, and most of their works placed on the Index at some time or other, the modernists had a profound long-term effect on the Church that would be realised belatedly with Vatican II. Blondel escaped the more radical punishments by moving away from the movement itself and shifting his emphases, but he held to the basic tenets of a closer interaction between modern philosophy and the historical and social sciences, the use of historical-critical methods in biblical study, the focus on practice and experience over against the intellectualism of scholastic theology, and a teleological reading of history and one's personal life. Although he was allowed to continue to teach, Lefebvre notes the trials he continued to face at the hands of the Church authorities.[65]

Four items stand out from Blondel's work that would influence a young Lefebvre in the throes of his long exit from the Church: the emphasis on volition and its incompleteness, the importance of experience and practice, the need for action, and the absolute either/or of God's demand upon us. Blondel's notion that the desire of the human will falls short of satisfaction as long as it focuses on finite things echoes Ernst Bloch's argument that a fundamental utopian feature of human existence is the sense that one's life is never complete, that we wish always to do more than we have done, that we know we should reach beyond ourselves. Both are thoroughly teleological:

---

[65] See Lefebvre 1989 [1959], p. 371.

for Blondel, this desire of the will points to God, whereas, for Bloch, it leads to a communism as it has not yet existed. Lefebvre would shift from the one position to the other, but the importance of volition, the assertion of the will, and the teleology of both his individual life and history itself in the sense of an unrealised desire for fulfilment remained with him.

Secondly, for all Blondel's interest in the scholastic proofs of God's existence, they mean nothing without the experience of God with which one begins, an almost inchoate and obscure experience that only later finds rational expression. Lefebvre was perhaps one of Blondel's most enthusiastic students in this respect, although he would shift such an experiential and often visionary mode of living and thinking away from the Church. Throughout his written work, the reader keeps coming across extraordinary experiential pieces, such as the vision of the crucified sun,[66] or his vision of nature while caught in the grip of the ocean.[67] Thirdly, with the group of young *Philosophes* at the Sorbonne after his time in Aix-en-Provence (1917–19), Lefebvre was to emphasise the importance of action rather than reflection in philosophy. Railing against the dry dominance of Bergson and Brunschvicg, they played pranks on and disturbed the lectures of both, drank, danced, brawled, wrote poetry, had lots of sex, and published a journal, *Philosophies* in which they fired off ideas in all sorts of directions with a distinctly romantic, messianic and mystical tone, all with the postwar sense that the old order had nothing to say.[68]

But it is the absoluteness of the either/or, the great division into two mutually exclusive camps that is the strongest legacy on Lefebvre.[69] In Blondel's theology, the decision for or against God was cast in terms of faith, a personal decision that each and every one of us must make, but in this respect he shows himself very much part of the institutional Church. For is not the image of the individual believer (or unbeliever) coming face to face with God in a moment of absolute choice the surest way that the institution of the Church simultaneously effaces itself and asserts its abiding presence? (For Althusser,

---

[66] Lefebvre 1989 [1959], p. 252; Lefebvre 1995, pp. 95–101.
[67] Lefebvre 1995, pp. 127–31.
[68] See further Shields 1999, pp. 12–13.
[69] Lefebvre claims it was Blondel's emphasis on love (Lefebvre 1989 [1959], p. 360), but he seems to have connected Blondel's lectures with his failed effort seduce a young woman in the class.

of course, this is the prime and originating form of ideology.) It is, in other words, a decision for or against the Church, in which there was no middle ground. Blondel did, in fact, take some flak from the hierarchy for a position that smacked a little too much of the Protestant insistence on the individual outside the purvey of the Church, but he is, in the end, a distinctly Roman-Catholic philosopher. Lefebvre would carry the inseparable connection between faith and institution with him in his winding path out of the Church: a decision against God was a decision against the Church, and vice versa. And it was a great either/or, all or nothing.

Joachim de Fiore and mysticism

> As a prophet of the Holy Ghost, I would have carried my ardent prediction into the very bosom of the Church.[70]

The study under Blondel was to move in a very different direction as well, namely the millenarian mysticism of Joachim of Fiore (or 'Flora', mystic). I am tempted to argue that Fiore's Trinitarian reading of history had a distinct effect on Lefebvre's predilection for the dialectic and Hegelian Marxism as a whole, and I could, indeed, push this question further in light of his own application of Fiore's distinction as a universally applicable division between the rule of Law, Experience and Spirit, or Law, Faith and Joy, or his preference for a dialectic of triplicity.[71] However, what is more interesting at the moment is the nature of Fiore's reading of history.

Abbot of his own Cistercian monastery at Fiore in Calabria (receiving papal sanction in 1196 CE), Fiore's grand periodisation moved from the *Ordo conjugatorum*, through the *Ordo clericorum* to the *Ordo monachorum* or *contemplatium*. The first, that of the Law was the Old-Testament era itself under the dominance of the Father, while the second was that of the Son, the New-Testament period of Grace. The final era, which you would expect, given the intellectual tools with which Fiore had to work, would have begun with Pentecost, was to be the age of the Spirit, proceeding from the Old and New Testaments (as

---

[70] Lefebvre 1991, p. 223.

[71] As with spaces of representation, representations of space and spatial practice, or between representation, represented and representing. See further, Shields 1999, pp. 99, 109–26.

with the Western version of the Nicene Creed).[72] However, Fiore argued that it would actually begin around 1260 CE, a little after his own time. This age will be one of the liberty of the *Spiritualis Intellectus*, leading to the rise of new religious orders that would convert the world and bring in the *Ecclesia Spiritualis*, the Church of the Spirit or spiritual Church.

The influence of Fiore's ideas, which were never explicitly condemned by the Roman-Catholic Church, within Christianity is profound. For instance, we can see it in the Reformers' notion of the universal church that includes all believers outside institutional forms. And a study still needs to be done of Fiore's influence in more recent thought, including Ernst Bloch's championing of Fiore's utopian agenda, psychoanalysis (especially Irigaray), and Lefebvre himself. His rebellious cult of the Holy Ghost that I mentioned earlier is a clear successor to Fiore's expectation of the third age. Further, in an explicit debt to Fiore, Lefebvre interpreted the process toward the communist revolution as the steps through the cycle of law, faith and then joy. He held to an idea of the joyous revolution to the end of his life: 'Between the moment of faith and that of joy there would be a place for the revolution.... Marxism... was a means to pass from the reign of faith to that of joy, or if one wishes, from the reign of faith to the reign of Spirit'.[73] Hence the continued fascination with festival, where the glimpse of revolution may already be found, the discarding of alienation in collective hilarity, excess and celebration. He was, in other words, using one tradition of theology against the Church itself, which comes down on festival with the heavy hand of repression, organisation and boredom.

And then there was the mysticism, part of the attraction to Fiore and, in many respects, a pressure-chamber on his way out of the Church and to Marxism. Not the first or last of a great line of mystic millenarians, Fiore was merely one of the most influential. For all Lefebvre's efforts to cover his tracks, claiming that, by the time some of his essays were published in 1927, he had moved beyond the mystical texts written in the mid 1920s for the journal *Philosophies* (1924–5) and its brief successor *L'Esprit* (two issues in 1926–7), mysticism and a closely associated romanticism remained an inescapable part of his Marxism

---

[72] 'I believe in the Holy Ghost, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son.' The famous filioque (and the Son) clause was a major cause of division between the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Catholic) Churches.

[73] Interview with Lefebvre 1987, cited in Shields 1999, p. 32.

that never relinquished the desire for a utopia of joy and Spirit. Allied to Blondel's focus on experience and volition, the encounter with God before any rational explication, Lefebvre's mystical writings[74] drew not only from Fiore but also Pascal and Nietzsche whom he studied at Aix-en-Provence and the Sorbonne. If the cult of the Holy Ghost was indebted to Fiore, the other great Dionysiac rebellion of the 'Notes Written One Sunday' refers to this Nietzschean-inspired mysticism.

Jansen and the Albigensians

> Jansen's? Too dry, too terribly eighteenth-century petty bourgeois, and as far as boredom goes, his *Augustinus* beats even the *Summa Theologiae*.[75]

Lefebvre's perpetual mention and the dismissal of the seventeenth-century heretic Cornelius Otto Jansen (1585–1638), teacher at Louvain and Bishop of Ypres, strike curious notes in his work. In his autobiography, *Le Somme et le reste* of 1959, an almost inescapable although problematic reference point, he places his mother in the ranks of the Jansenists. If he found his mother's mystical passion something that stayed with him, then he did his best to dispense with the rigorous determinism and Puritanism of Jansen's predestination.[76]

Lefebvre, on the other hand, can hardly be described as a Jansenist, given his emphasis on joy, celebration and volition. For the Jansenists, classically following the five prepositions drawn from Jansen's *Augustinus* (1640 CE), held that God's grace itself is irresistible and that this grace was absolutely necessary in order to follow God's commandments, that no-one, in other words, could do any good without grace. Further, in light of God's irresistible grace, human beings are part of the larger scheme of predestination in which God not only determines one's everyday life but also those who will be saved. Yet, the Jansenists were no blockheads: they held to the paradox of free will and grace, arguing not only that God's grace was not coercive, but that there was a natural as well as a supernatural determinism. I have used the terms determinism and predestination interchangeably, but the Jansenists as well as

---

[74] These were published in *L'Esprit*: Lefebvre 1927b, Lefebvre 1927a, Lefebvre 1926b, Lefebvre 1926a.

[75] Lefebvre 1991, p. 223.

[76] See Lefebvre 1989 [1959], pp. 251, 259–66.

the Calvinists after them carefully distinguished between the fatalism inherent in determinism, which is more of a pagan notion deriving from ancient Greece and Rome, and predestination proper that provides hope and an incentive to action rather than the despair of fatalism. Like the Calvinists, Jansenism held to a stern moral code that was one's right and proper response to God's grace.

Never quite exterminated, in part due to the tolerance of the Dutch (and the affinity with Calvinism), the Jansenists were hounded and persecuted by the Roman-Catholic Church. A succession of popes and statements, from Innocent X in 1653 to the papal bull 'Ungenitus' in 1713, sought to overcome the Jansenist evasions. Jansenism, especially its wide influence through the sisters Jacqueline and Agnès Arnauld, successive abbesses of the Convent of Port-Royal, and their brother Antoine Arnauld, major theologian of Jansenism after Saint Cyrian, has its own place in Marxist criticism through the work of Lucien Goldmann.[77]

Hardly Lefebvre's scene, yet I wonder whether his own dismissal is a little too hasty. For Jansen and Saint Cyrian were from his own region in the south of France, with its long history of refusing the external power of Rome, let alone more local French politics. Thus, in his narrative of the heavy suppression of the Albigensian heresy in the western Pyrenées, he writes that at the moment of the apparent success of the Inquisition, when Louis XIII was able to tour a subjugated countryside in 1620:

> All this took place between 1610 and 1620. It was not without its consequences, nor its backlash. While Louis XIII was meandering majestically from town to town, two men met in nearby Bayonne: Jansenius and Saint Cyrian.…[78]

For all his claims about the lack of fit between Jansenist thought and his own, I cannot help but notice that he lines himself up with these non-conforming and rebellious Southerners.

His insurrectionary heritage is long, but there is more than mere regional identification. Using the dominant language available, that of Christian theology, the Jansenists, like the Calvinists, were able to explain coherently the sense of determination by forces outside the apparent freedom of the human

---

[77] Goldmann 1964.
[78] Lefebvre 1995, p. 60.

will. In this respect, there is a deep affinity with Marxism's exploration of the paradox of free will, or human agency, and the determination of human action by social, economic and political factors. Marx would, of course, argue for a dialectic, which Lefebvre himself championed throughout his life, in which the political and economic elements, as well as those of nature themselves, have been shaped in the first place by human beings.

I want to take this one step further and pick up Lefebvre's comments on the Albigensians. A French branch of the Cathari (the 'pure'), who also appeared in Germany and Italy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they had the closest affinities with the Gnostics and Manichaeans. Rousing the worst of the Church's anger, they found themselves face to face with a brutal Crusade (Innocent III), and those who escaped the Crusade ran straight into a less than friendly Inquisition. The Albigensians held to a strict dualism: all matter was evil, and therefore Christ did not have a real body. He was, in fact, an angel with a phantom body, who neither suffered nor rose from the dead. Further, the Sacraments were of evil matter, celebrating the body of one who did not have a body. All of this required a rigorous moral code, in which there was to be no marriage or the use of animal products. The Albigensians were not entirely unpractical, realising the need for at least some children in order to keep the group alive, so they distinguished in good dualist fashion between the 'perfect', who followed all of the moral laws, and the ordinary believers who married and lead what were felt to be relatively normal lives. The difference between them was the *consolamentum*, the baptism of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands: the perfect had already received the *consolamentum*, whereas the believers would receive when death seemed imminent.

For Lefebvre, the beliefs of his Albigensian ancestors, no matter how demanding or dehumanised, showed up the uncomfortable truth of Christianity:

> It was perfectly logical, perfectly coherent, the perfect theory of a perfect ontology. It challenged official Christianity by showing it its consequences and by refusing the compromises which were essential for the Church to function as a social form. Official Christianity understood the challenge, and made it clear in no uncertain terms that it had understood it.[79]

[79] Ibid.

This is an almost Lacanian point, namely, that the apparent extreme of the Albigensians shows Christianity the unbearable truth at the heart of its own position. Shorn of the compromises and accommodations made by Christian theology, the balance of paradoxes, the muted dualism between the devil and God, Albigensianism presented a radical dualism that did not shy from the consequences. Not only was Christianity illogical and untenable, but the dumping of all that it opposed, all that was undesirable, on the devil, is the fact that the Church itself embodies all of the devil's vices; hence the persecution.

The Devil

> I would write a vast, serious and well-documented opus several volumes long, entitled *The Metamorphoses of the Devil*.[80]

The Albigensians did indeed leave their mark on Lefebvre's thought in a rather direct fashion. Having explored all of the existing heresies in an obverse ecumenism, he develops one or two of his own. Perhaps the most entertaining of these is the short essay in *Introduction to Modernity* called 'Metamorphoses of the Devil'.[81] Here, of course, the stark dualism of the Albigensians turns up, but the most extraordinary section of the essay comes at its close, in the short science fiction story in which the spaceship *Teilhard de Chardin* comes across the planet Omega. Here, God has been a success, unlike so many other planets. In the sketch of a history of this planet, it turns out that God has eschewed immortality and omniscience. He/She is located somewhere between the finite and the infinite, being merely very powerful.

On this planet, God embodies all that Lefebvre sought: eternal youthfulness (he merely incarnates himself as yet another young person when he grows old); God is full of the joy and zest of life; all the women and men love him, 'but in a nicer way, without being too pious about it';[82] God is both male and female, for when the planet's primary moon passes by everyone changes sex; and God is a revolutionary, rather than the reactionary he became on earth. In fact, it is the Devil who is the reactionary, the leader of the conservatives.

---

[80] Lefebvre 1995, p. 56.
[81] Lefebvre 1995, pp. 56–64.
[82] Lefebvre 1995, p. 63.

Although God won the revolution against the priests, landowners, aristocrats, capitalists and so forth, problems came to a head with the promise of immortality. Those now in power, the Party, ensured that they achieved immortality first, and so stayed in power forever. Ensconced in their positions, the Devil became their champion and in the war between immortals and mortals God manages victory only by the withering away of the state, that is, by instituting communism, in other words immortality for everyone. The Devil comes to a grisly end, committing suicide in a duel with God, but not before God has reluctantly been forced to put together an army, a police force, a church and a state.

I must admit that the more I read this story, the more puzzled I am. The immediate point is the way the creative heresy of the Albigensians underwent its own metamorphosis in Lefebvre's thought. The first time I read it, it seemed to me that the inversion of the roles of the Devil and God enacts a further inversion, for, by the close of the story, God has metamorphosed into the Devil, the latter's suicide marking the transition. But then, on a later reading in the context of the essay as a whole, Lefebvre's championing of the Devil over against the Church as the heresy of all heresies suggests an awareness despite himself of Bloch's beloved point: that there is indeed a subversive current within Christianity, that the rebellion against God comes out of the same material that venerates him. On this level, the story becomes a wish fulfilment, for God is in fact not on the side of the Church at all. That is where the Devil has his home.

On religion: reading Lefebvre against himself

In what follows, I want to pick up the last possibility and take it for a run. More than a mere predilection for heresies (and he would suffer from the PCF for that), the influence of Maurice Blondel, Joachim de Fiore and Cornelius Otto Jansen seems to have been stronger than Lefebvre cared to imagine. And that influence is the first opening of a more positive reading of religion in his work, despite his own polemic. I will, of course, need to read Lefebvre against himself, exploiting certain contradictions that are more evident in a writer whose work throws out so many ideas without developing all of them. Yet, for a resolutely dialectic thinker like Lefebvre, the focus on contradictions is to make use of the method he himself favours so much.

Lefebvre's ostensible theory of religion can be summed up fairly easily: religion superimposes itself on a much more vital magic and squeezes out its life; religion is infinitely syncretistic, absorbing and transforming a myriad of beliefs, myths and practices as it persists through eras in which everything else seems to change; it is fundamentally alienating, a prime cause and effect of the grovelling status in which human beings find themselves; and religion is remarkably tenacious and pervasive precisely through the hold it has on everyday life. In his own words, 'religion is nothing but a direct, immediate, negative, destructive, incessant and skilful criticism of life – skilful enough to give itself the appearance of not being what it really is'.[83] For Lefebvre, such religion may be characterised as the 'over-repressive society', and where Roman Catholicism slips up on its repressive task, Protestantism fills its shoes so much more efficiently.[84]

All the same, Lefebvre is a dialectical thinker, and there are moments where he allows room despite himself for a more dialectical notion of religion. Thus religions, theological or metaphysical projects, were *authentic* attempts to reconcile man with himself, the human with nature, the individual with the social. They achieved both their internal coherence and their entry into life from these attempts, in the form of actions, and the search for a style. Religious fervour and belief in a God gave symbolic expression to the unity of the elements of the human, and projected this unity outside man.

> In fact, however, at the very moment ideology was creating this unity by becoming a coherent doctrine and discovering a style of living, it was also perpetuating the inner division, in the form of good and evil, sin and salvation, God and the Devil. Religion as institution maintained a social unity by separating the sacred and the profane, and by oppression.[85]

I am going to pick up on this dialectic in what follows, emphasising both sides of the contradictions he traces: the authentic and the oppressive, the genuine effort at reconciliation between human being and nature, individual and society, as well as the perpetuation of such divisions in theological categories such as sin and salvation. In many respects, Lefebvre comes close to

---

[83] Lefebvre 1991, p. 252.
[84] Lefebvre 1971, pp. 145–7.
[85] Lefebvre 1991, p. 73.

Lévi-Strauss's influential theory, itself inspired by Marx, in which various cultural products, be they religion, literature or whatever, function as symbolic resolutions of real social contradictions. Further, the effort at resolving the contradiction on the symbolic level – God, art, a piece of literature, a philosophical system, and so on – actually manifests the effort at resolution in a whole series of new tensions, the ones Lefebvre identifies as the central contradictions of theology itself.

It seems to me that there are three areas of Lefebvre's thoughts on the Church that do not enlist entirely on the side of the forces of oppression and alienation. The first is the question of everyday life, the second may be found in another profoundly original and influential notion, namely the production of space, and the third may be located in his anger at women on their own, precisely within the Church.

Everyday life

At one level, the whole of the 'Notes Written One Sunday' comprises an effort at understanding the role of religion not only in his own life, nor even in the life of rural France, but its permeation of everyday life, the mundane quotidian events and acts of life. And I cannot help but agree with him that, in many respects, this permeation and determination of everyday life is dehumanising, that the various forms of Christianity consistently emphasise the sinfulness of human beings (only rare strains argue for an inherently good human nature), the need for confession, whether to a priest or directly to God, the inability to approach God without that prior moment of confession of guilt and request for forgiveness, and, in the Calvinism I know so well the complete inability of human beings to do anything good on their own, their total depravity and utter reliance on God's grace, who himself does not need to do anything for us, but chooses to do so out of grace (but this 'heresy' is characteristic of the Jansenism that fascinated Lefebvre).

The construction of everyday life in religious terms takes place for Lefebvre at a number of levels. On a macro-level, there is the global reach of a structure that determines so many of the contexts in which human beings live. At a micro-level, the Church's rituals and beliefs are internalised into the fabric of the human body and mind so as to be unnoticeable. Further, the model of the concerned benefactor, the one in whom you may confide your deepest secrets and concerns, is in so many ways based on the figure of 'the priest who

listens, understands, advises, reprimands or "pardons"'.[86] At yet another level, he identifies the perpetual guidance of behaviour by moral codes of which the Church held sole copyright, the suggestion as to how to behave at liminal moments of life and death. In short, at every moment of the day it provides 'an attitude, a way to behave… a ceremonial, the impression of doing something'.[87]

Yet, even though the insight concerning everyday life and religion was first enabled by the specificity of the Roman-Catholic Church – he might have added specific instances from birth to death in which the Church holds onto its own (school, sport, welfare, links with the most wayward apostates) – it is also the source of the major shortcoming of his assessment of the Church's role in everyday life. He consistently presents the domination of everyday life as an imposition from outside, as the external institution insinuating its codes of behaviour and interaction on human beings themselves. The Church, he writes in a telling phrase, '*penetrates everyday life*'.[88] Apart from the obvious point that human beings themselves make the Church what it is, the persistence in seeing the Church as somehow external is not only for the purposes of political opposition and denunciation, but also because of the nature of the Roman-Catholic Church. Particularly in France, with its long opposition to the dominance of Rome, the Roman-Catholic Church is always something outside that imposes itself on the local parish and one's everyday life. All of which leads Lefebvre to the position with which I have been less than impressed (following Althusser), namely, the cadre of priests, either cynical or not, manipulating the faithful for the sake of the institution.

However, there are a couple of moments when the whole picture of an alien invasion of everyday life slips.

> The ritual gesture when a funeral procession goes by, words of insult, an 'A-Dieu' when we part, a wish, a propitious phrase of greeting or thanks – *all such everyday attitudes still come down to us from magic and religion; they are really religious, or potentially so*. And this is where in the end the secret of religion's strength lies.

---

[86] Lefebvre 1991, p. 225.
[87] Lefebvre 1991, p. 226.
[88] Lefebvre 1991, p. 225.

> In this way the illusion by which religion deceives us (that vain and ever-broken promise of community, of the power to act) *tends to be born again with every action in our everyday lives. Exactly as, on another level, economic fetishism is reanimated* every single time an individual, unaware of the social structure, uses a coin or a note to buy the product of human labour, transformed into a commodity.[89]

To my mind, here lies the most intriguing suggestion as to the way in which religion remains so much at the centre of every life. As for the first part I have italicised, the semi-colon performs a curious function. To the left of the semi-colon: after a list of everyday acts, some of them admittedly rather Roman-Catholic and French, Lefebvre begins by saying that they 'come down to us', which I will read as 'derived from', magic and religion. Now, earlier, he had valorised magic over against religion, the latter superimposing its stifling and alienating beliefs and practices over a much more vital magic. Here, they seem to operate on a much more level plain. And, at this level, there is nothing inherently negative about the statement that so much of our everyday life is inescapably religious and magical, that it derives from long and half-forgotten religious patterns and practices. I will jump forward for a moment, for, in the final sentence of the first section I have quoted, Lefebvre writes: 'And this is where in the end the secret of religion's strength lies'.[90] More so than the well-known arguments concerning the modern institutions of hospitals, schools, welfare, or even the enabling power of theology and biblical studies for the sciences and humanities. Rather, for Lefebvre, it is in the practices of everyday life that religion is at its strongest.

But what of the right-hand side of the semi-colon? Here, Lefebvre imperceptibly flicks a switch that suddenly materialises us on the other side of his argument. Religion is no longer imposed, brutally or subtly, from outside, as most of the essay bitterly argues. Rather, these actions are 'religious, or potentially so'.[91] It is the 'potentially so' that intrigues me, for now we no longer have everyday actions derived from religion, but actions that are potentially religious. In other words, we are back with the argument concerning magic, namely, that certain acts took on magical significance in the various

---

[89] Lefebvre 1991, p. 226; italics mine.
[90] Lefebvre 1991, p. 226.
[91] Ibid.

interplays of human beings within nature. The difference in this quotation is that Lefebvre speaks of religion, not magic. A slip? If so, it is a significant one. For the implication is that, as long as human beings interact with each other and with nature, there will never be a moment when a certain act – a greeting or curse or wish or hope – will not be potentially religious, will not give itself out into some form of religious observance or ritual, however small or insignificant.

The danger of such an argument is that it can end up with the banal and useless position that human beings are inherently religious or spiritual. There is much more going on here, and Lefebvre has but hinted at it with his 'potentially so'. But, in order to see what he touches in passing, I need to look at the second section I have quoted, particularly the comparison with economic fetishism. And what interests me is the notion, or rather figure, of reanimation and being born-again. The illusion of religion 'tends to be born again with every action in our everyday lives'.[92] His own language enacts the point, since the notion of being born again cannot avoid the reported speech of Jesus to Nicodemus in the text of John 3: 3: 'Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God'. Lefebvre's unwitting interpretation of this passage is: you cannot help but recreate religion with each action of one's daily life. No matter how dead, forgotten or rejected religion may be, individually or collectively, it is reborn a million times a day.

Apart from some hidden but tireless ability to resuscitate itself, Lefebvre has not indicated why religion tends to be reborn. This is where the economic comparison comes in: not given to weak forms of argument, the comparison itself is exact. On each occasion, a person purchases a commodity with money 'economic fetishism is reanimated'.[93] This time, Lefebvre replaces 'born again' with 'reanimated', evoking the central Christian category of resurrection. Now, we find both religion and commodity fetishism resurrected countless times a day. The connection, of course, is that both religion and economic fetishism (the term fetish itself comes from the study of religions) are forms of alienation in Lefebvre's work, but one would hardly argue that economic fetishism is reanimated due to some innate tendency of the economy or of commodities themselves. Rather, the very possibility of economic fetishism

[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.

relies on the existence of a distinct system of political economics with its attendant pattern of social and cultural interaction. This context is the import of the phrase 'unaware of the social structure'.[94] I do not want to spend too much time in the theory of reification (Lukács), especially the notion that reification saturates human life under capitalism, or with the metaphorisation of the market as a constitutive feature of the same economic system (Jameson), but the point is that the very ways in which we think, act and interact cannot operate without such patterns, so much so that it is impossible to imagine otherwise. So also with religion (with the full force of Lefebvre's 'exactly as'), which now becomes a distinct cultural, institutional, social and so often economic form. Except that, to make such distinctions, as well as those like psychological, intellectual, philosophical, judicial and political are part of a reified pattern of thinking foreign to the eras in which religion was dominant. In other words, at certain times (I think here of the debated Asiatic mode of production, or feudalism), religion is the language of human culture without which human beings would not have been able to interact with one another, let alone think or exist.[95] Only in this way, it seems to me, can Lefebvre's argument concerning the strength and power of religion in everyday life be understood. No wonder, then, that it persists at the level of the quotidian.

Space

The second point at which a more positive reading of religion emerges out of Lefebvre's work concerns space. Here, I want to revisit the small church, sitting outside for a moment to ponder his book *The Production of Space* before passing over the threshold again to consider the feminised space of the church building.

But, before I do, let me tarry for a moment with his image of the 'crucified sun'. For Lefebvre, the strongest image of the destructive and stifling nature of religion comes with this famous crucified sun. It is, of course, the Celtic cross, with its circle superimposed over the Christian cross, still found in Celtic

[94] Ibid.

[95] Or, as he will put it elsewhere: 'Theological faith is dead, metaphysical reason is dead. And yet they live on, they take on new life – insanely, absurdly – because the situation and the human conflicts from which they were born have not been resolved. Now these conflicts are not in the realm of thought alone, but in everyday life' (Lefebvre 1991, p. 141).

regions such as France and Scotland. Still in his teens, Lefebvre relates in the ever-present autobiographical tenor of his writing how he was sitting beneath such a cross at one of the many cross-roads in the Pyrenées, when the vision struck him: 'Abruptly I rose to my feet and looked at the cross above my head: "They have crucified the sun! They have crucified the sun!' And in horror I escaped from that place, from that thing"'.[96] Reading the crucified sun as the repressive effect of Christianity on all that was enjoyable in life, especially on a personal level, he sought to unshackle the sun from its burden, remove the repressions and hold Christianity responsible. For Lefebvre, the sun was the symbol of pre-Christian, pagan religious and social life, the spontaneous life full of bonhomie that was systematically suppressed by Christianity.[97] His own kin, the people of that region had committed the unforgivable crime of crucifying the sun instead of the son of God, thereby abolishing the vital and ancient magic of life in place of the devotions, bigotries and unhealthy loathing of all things sexual that dominated his youth. 'I would like to call', he goes on to write, 'an encounter like this a "moment." It has affected my entire life.... From that day forward, or rather, from that crucial moment, I began to put Christianity on trial'.[98] Although he states that the crucified sun enabled him to transform his hatred for his home into the pioneering work of rural sociology, so that he would eventually return there in the last years of his life, the complexities of that hatred and fascination show up in the 'Notes Written One Sunday' with its mix of passion and careful argument.

What Lefebvre would like to do, then, is release the sun from its shackles, resurrect it, if you like, on the other side of the grave; hence the dark and dank village church from which the sun has been banished. Like Plato's famous allegory of the cave, Lefebvre would like to lead the worshippers out of the dark church and into the sun outside. The problem with all of this is that the cave is far more interesting than the sun, for his desire to lead everyone out into the sun runs up against his famous and well-worked analysis of space. So let us see what that dialectic of spatial practice, representations of space and spaces of representation means for a second tour through the darkened village church. Briefly put, his dialectic of space makes the following distinctions:

---

[96] Lefebvre 1989 [1959], p. 252.
[97] See Lefebvre 1989 [1959], pp. 252–3; Lefebvre 1995, pp. 95–101.
[98] Lefebvre 1989 [1959], p. 253.

1. *Spatial practice*, embracing production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice ensures continuity and some degree of cohesion. In terms of social space, and of each member of a given society's relationship to that space, this cohesion implies a guaranteed level of *competence* and a specific level of *performance*. This is space perceived [*perçu*] in the commonsense mode.
2. *Representations of space* [*représentations de l'espace*]: the discourses on space, the realms of analysis, design and planning, which are tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to 'frontal' relations. In other words, the conception of space [*l'espace conçu*].
3. *Spaces of representation* [*espaces de la représentation*]: the deeper presuppositions behind plans and definitions. Coded, recoded and decoded, these spaces embody complex symbolisms, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art. It provides partially concealed criticism of social orders and the categories of social thought, and may happen through bodies, aesthetics, gender, and so on. As the third part of a dialectic it offers, as lived space [*l'espace vécu*], as historical sediments or glimpses of the new, utopian possibilities of a new spatialisation of social life.[99]

Given Lefebvre's hostility to the Church, one would expect the village church to fall into the first and second categories. But then, the fact that he valorises the sun over against the cross suggests otherwise, for is not the sun a representation of space, overt and frontal, clear as the light of day? This would render the church itself a space of representation. But, before we enter the church itself, let me emphasise what I take to be the crucial point from this schema, namely the distinction between *frontal and hidden*, the overt and the covert relations of production. For this is the key to his distinction – an odd one, on first reading – between the representations of space and spaces of representation. Not only does each mode of production produce specific types of social space, but it also has a specific type of relations of production (the organisation of human resources in terms of class, division of labour, and so on). The issue here is how those relations of production operate spatially. In order to trace this, Lefebvre invokes all the complexity of his dialectical

[99] See Lefebvre 1991b, pp. 33, 245.

materialism. Under capitalism, he identifies three types of interaction between reproduction and the social relations of production: biological reproduction, the reproduction of labour-power, and the reproduction of the social relations of production. Each of these three interacting layers is displayed symbolically, simultaneously exhibited and displaced, that is, concealed. Such a symbolic system works with relations of production that are both out there and not, in the forefront and clandestine, explicit and repressed. The former, overt type appears in the forms of monuments, public art and buildings, especially those of state and business: this is the realm of the representation of space, the frontal, obvious node of the relations of production. The more covert and clandestine version, the shadowy realm of spaces of representation, is interested in what is hidden, closed over, spaces that represent in wayward and diverse fashions. The notion of covert and overt, of hidden and clear, comes, of course, from the Marxist perception of class conflict as crucial to historical processes. And it is not for nothing that Lefebvre locates the opposition in the realm of relations of production, determined as they are by class and class conflict. The frontal class, the one of monuments and impressive buildings and the clear marks of power, stands over against that class which is repressed, beaten down and exploited. Lefebvre's innovation is to widen this to the symbolic field of relation of production, of class relations.

But what does this mean for the Church itself, particularly the village church in Navarrenx? Initially, it is a hub of the village, part of the perceived spatial practice. Yet it is also central to the representation of space, or at least Lefebvre would like to keep it in this realm.[100] The overt patterns of its architecture, however modest, the fact that it is there as part of a much larger global network of the Roman-Catholic Church, its inseparable relationship to a whole set of codes and knowledge (theology, doctrine and the Bible), and its every corner overloaded with signs – all of these locate it squarely in the representation of space. Lefebvre identifies the church building's own claims to its place within a vast network: the evocation of the cosmos, the holy family of the Virgin, the Son, Joseph and God himself, the connection between heaven, earth and the realm of the dead, the mass with its overdone symbolism, and the ability to say everything about human life, history and the universe. In the end, the surest mark of its frontal spatial control is the overwhelming alienation that

[100] See Lefebvre 1991b, p. 45.

Lefebvre reads everywhere in the building, its people and its rituals. As far as he is concerned the order imposed by the church, which stands in as the local manifestation of the Church, is dehumanising, crushing the symbiosis with nature that he at least finds in the magic of his ideal rural community.

Yet, when we enter the church, after hesitating on the threshold, a somewhat different picture emerges. In fact, the preceding description is characteristic more of the cathedral than a small village church.[101] By contrast, the interior of the village church is 'an empty, echoing space, with hidden recesses crammed with hundreds of objects'.[102] 'Small, dark, mysterious, a bit like a cave',[103] full of the smell of damp and incense. Almost to his relief, in a deeper recess he finds statuettes of 'the little patron saints of cattle and sheep',[104] St Blasius and St Roch, whom the crafty locals have enlisted to their aid simultaneously. Even the mass is as simple as possible, 'reduced to its bare essentials, with no grand organ, canon's kiss or plumed verger'.[105] Lefebvre himself, as I noted earlier, argues that the strength of Roman Catholicism lies in the ability to link these mundane, everyday realities, with the transcendent power of God. But the description of the dark, cave-like interior of the church pulls in another direction that he cannot contain, despite his effort to describe it elsewhere as cryptic space, as the control of the Church over death.[106] And that is the covert, clandestine dimension of the spaces of representation. Lefebvre's description slips over into an underground space, dimly lit with filtered light, damp and recessed. Historical sediments clutter every turn and corner. Above all, as part of the village it is integral to the lived space of the peasants who live there and attend the church. Even those who do not attend count in some way: 'The murmur of a threshing machine can be heard getting slowly louder, suddenly cutting out and then starting again. The godless are working on this holy day'.[107]

But, if this is indeed a space of representation, the realm of the covert and hidden, is it not also a source for Lefebvre of possible subversion and revolution? Clandestine and underground, critical of social order, the possibility

---

[101] See Lefebvre 1991b, pp. 257–61, 266–7, 369.
[102] Lefebvre 1991, p. 213.
[103] Lefebvre 1991, p. 214.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Lefebvre 1991, p. 219.
[106] See Lefebvre 1991, pp. 254–6.
[107] Lefebvre 1991, p. 218.

emerges that the space of this small village church may also be one of a more critical and political form of Christianity. Lefebvre, of course, does not make this point, being tied in the end to a rather conventional form of the Marxist criticism of religion. Repressive, alienating, the prime form of ideology as mystification, he does not entertain any other possibility. And, yet, his own theory of space points in another direction.

Women

Despite himself, it seems to me that the polemic against the Church cannot efface this other, lived dimension of the village church. It remains to be seen whether I can locate in the midst of his critique of religion a critique of existing social relations and the possibilities of utopian re-spatialisation. But, first, the interior of the church building is both sexualised and feminised in Lefebvre's text. One cannot help but notice the male sexual image of penetration that runs through the passage: he delays on entry, only to increase the pleasure of the anticipated penetration, knowing full well the fear, attraction and enticement of the interior. The small, dark, moist church full of musty smells functions at one level as vagina and womb, whose interiors his own penis had at so many moments come to know very well (and I speak here of the church at Navarrenx and the myriad women with whom he had sex). But, rather than stay at the level of crude allegory, or even read it as a polemic against the Roman-Catholic Church's suppression of the pleasure of sex (the orgiastic pleasures or food, drink and sex of the pre-Christian rural festivals have been sucked dry by a Church that has rendered them dull and boring), I want to focus on the possibility that the representation of space is both bodied and gendered, specifically in terms of women.

Along with an effeminate priest, and the people who enter the church for worship, Lefebvre offers detailed descriptions of two, the widow and the devout young girl. The priest himself, transformed in the mass into an assured representative of the Church, is in his everyday life 'under his sister's thumb'.[108] A local, he has a 'slight figure, a pale long face'; he is 'a shy man, with little authority in the village'.[109] It turns out that the majority of worshippers

[108] Lefebvre 1991, p. 222.
[109] Ibid.

are women, as one will find in almost any country church, Roman-Catholic or otherwise: 'old women…, sly, impatient urchins, shopkeepers' daughters who have come to show off their Sunday dresses, one or two men'.[110] Domestically, most of the women have made great compromises with their men, from which Sunday worship then becomes a chance for women to be among themselves. Few men attend church, and when they do they sit in a small group at the back of the church: 'On one side the guild of women. On the other, farther back, nearer the door, the men. They are the last to come and the first to leave'.[111] Religion then becomes very much a woman's realm, to the annoyance of the men who continue to run the show.

The annoyance is also Lefebvre's. For some reason, the widow in black and the earnest young girl ignite his fury. The black widow arrives at worship first on the Sunday morning:

> Across the cold paving glides a black shape, the folds in its dress completely immobile. A widow! It's a widow! Everything about her signals it. An unspeakably insipid, unspeakably dreary placidity fills her chubby face, settles at the bottom of her faded cheeks. Fat and stiff, she glides noiselessly. *Surely nothing had ever disturbed this stagnating placidity. Surely she was born a widow*. They say she is very good to the church; she comes to sweep it, tending to the decorations, replacing the dying flowers with armfuls of fresh ones; she is intoxicated with her own humility and self-effacement; she picks up the rubbish with her bare hands; she is the handmaiden of this holy house – but under her falsely pious modesty what pride lies hidden![112]

This is meant to be read as a profound sign of the alienation produced by the Church, but is the name-calling needed? Unspeakably insipid, dreary placidity, chubby face, faded cheeks, fat, stiff and stagnating: there is an overload here that goes well beyond the point he wants to make. At one level, it is, of course, another outburst of anger that I traced earlier, where Lefebvre forgets the argument for the sake of some ulcer-relieving bile. But the italicised words suggest that something else is going on here, and that relates to my observation about the sexualisation of the space of the small

---

[110] Lefebvre 1991, pp. 218–19.
[111] Lefebvre 1991, p. 219.
[112] Lefebvre 1991, p. 218; italics mine.

village church, rendering it a vaginal and womblike interior. For Lefebvre, the problem with the widow is that she is unavailable sexually. In fact, she never was: she has always been a widow, for nothing has had the chance to 'disturb' her placidity. So impenetrable, so inaccessible, gliding along ghost-like, he cannot even identify her gender when she first turns up.

From what does Lefebvre recoil? Is she repulsive sexually? Is it her false humility? Is the Church's repression of sex at fault? Or is it her inability even to become aroused and enjoy sex (note the repeated 'placidity')? The answer to all of these questions is affirmative, of course, but I would also suggest that it is the woman who negates any interaction with men, that she somehow remains outside the reach of a man like Lefebvre. All he can do then is cast her in a characteristic role of the dried-up widow who has nothing better to do than tend to the church.

Lefebvre's description of the widow suggests a bodily resistance to the overt, controlling codes characteristic of the representations of space, whether these are the codes of the Church itself or the sexual codes of someone like Lefebvre. In other words, the widow will not give up everything to the harsh light of day. But note also the tasks she undertakes: sweeping, decorating, tending flowers, and picking up rubbish. All are extensions of domestic tasks, the ones that women find themselves doing in the radical compromise of domestic space. For all Lefebvre's disdain, these domestic tasks might be read as an extension of domestic space into the village church itself, or the rendering of the Church as a feminised domestic realm. In the end, the result is the same.

Lefebvre's annoyance extends to another woman, this time one who is young and devout:

> How many people here are genuine believers, not satisfied with gestures but ardently grasping their faith as an *object*? This young girl, perhaps, her whole body tensed and bent forward on her chair, gazing spellbound on the great Christ, his pink body stained with the blood of his wounds? There is something distraught about her eyes which contrasts with the peacefulness, the already unutterably bored peacefulness, of her face. *Someone else cut out to be a widow, or an eternal virgin*? With what sacrifices is she purchasing this peace of the true believer, innocently confident in an earthly and heavenly future, a little soul in the arms of the Father, a little lamb beneath the shepherd's crook? Contemptible, unfought-for peace; whatever deprivations

> and conflicts may exist, they are placidly ignored, disdained; childishness is prolonged, cultivated even – a premature annihilation; I recognize you, despicable peace of my childhood![113]

This time, Lefebvre holds the venom until he has finished describing the young virgin, launching into a tirade on the false peace fostered by the Church and the emotional trap of the dialectic of faith and anguish. In some respects, the image is a little more sympathetic. Is it because he has been there, experienced this 'peace', this faith and devotion, only to face interminable anguish as he rejected his faith? He gives the impression of depicting something sincere for the young woman, no matter how empty he might feel it to be, in contrast to the obviously false humility of the widow. The only passion she can experience is her devotion to Christ. Even so, the young woman is the flip side of old repulsive black widow: she is a widow in training, or rather, an eternal virgin. He has given us the two images of the virgin one after the other, the one past sex and the other forever denying sex. In both cases, these women are not available for men. Their interest and attention lies elsewhere.

The obvious move to make here is to Mary herself, Virgin and Mother all rolled into one. But let me contrast the depiction of the young woman, which even with its hint of sympathy finds her unacceptable to a comparable passage on Kierkegaard a little earlier in the book. Here, he reads the anxiety of Kierkegaard's *Journal*, the trap of the individual bourgeois life and its dead-ends, the apparent unity that faith provides only to ensnare him all the more in anxiety, as the 'conflict between everyday life as it is – as it has been made by the bourgeoisie – and the life which a human being actually demands, begs for, cries out for with all his strength'.[114] Kierkegaard's faith, no matter how futile and absurd, becomes a protest against the reality of life in capitalist society, specifically on the level of everyday life. Because the human conflicts to which faith is an attempted answer have not been resolved, faith continues to be a solution, no matter how dead. Lefebvre is reading Kierkegaard in terms of Marx's famous description of religion not merely as the opiate of the people, but also as the protest against the very conditions of exploitation and alienation for which religious faith is an attempted resolution. But Lefebvre

---

[113] Lefebvre 1991, p. 219; italics mine.
[114] Lefebvre 1991, p. 140.

also reads Marx in light of Kierkegaard, who now provides a much fuller and specific explication of Marx's cryptic comments.

The question, however, is why Kierkegaard, unnamed until Lefebvre has finished outlining his image of the angst-ridden young man, may provide a distinct role for religious faith as a protest and criticism of bourgeois everyday life, and why the fervent young woman in church does not. There is no analysis of her situation in life, the limited options open to a young woman in a rural community, the undesirable path to housekeeper and servant of a man, for which religious faith and devotion and virginity become the only alternative, however problematic they might be.

Let me return to Mary for a few moments before seeing where the women in the church leave Lefebvre. The lines devoted to Mary, as he faces the image of the Madonna on the right side of the high altar, are almost empty of the venom that pours through the rest of the text. He notes the double-bind that devotion to Mary produces for the Church hierarchy: 'Great goddess in the process of formation (or revival), but reduced by a prudent theology to the rank of mediator, it is she who attracts the most wishes, the most support, the most prayers'.[115] Object of the most intense piety and extra-terrestrial communication, she must be locked carefully in place, a display cabinet slightly to the side of the main show lest she threaten the established hierarchy itself. Yet, I do not want to run too far down the common path that sees Mary as both a safety valve and potential for subversion within the Roman-Catholic Church. This is, of course, true and does not get us much further than advocating a reform agenda that allows Marian devotion its proper place as the focus for the piety of women who have no other options.

What Mary does do, in cohort with the black widow and the young devotee, is ensure that Lefebvre's village church is an ambiguously feminised space. And it seems to me that there is a good dose of his third spatial category in this building, the space of representation with its clandestine critique of the more blatant effort at control and clear direction (the representation of space) that one would expect with a church building. That critique is both bodied and gendered, and, although heavy with the sedimentation of the past, there is also a glimpse of a possible re-spatialisation that relies on the notion of women among themselves, ranks closed.

---

[115] Lefebvre 1991, p. 215.

Conclusion

All of the above is a somewhat long way to show how Lefebvre's own writing, when read against itself, allows the possibility for a more positive role for religion. It seems to me that, if we follow Lefebvre's heavily influential analysis of space and the valorisation of the third category, spaces of representation, as the locus of revolutionary promise and activity, then the village church in Navarrenx becomes one such space. Or, to move from the particular to the general, Christianity may well contain within it an inadvertent subversive and revolutionary potential. Ernst Bloch, of course, agrees and so does Slavoj Žižek, as we will find in a later chapter. But, unlike Žižek or Bloch with their focus on the Bible, the argument I have prized out of Lefebvre comes quite specifically through Roman Catholicism, with hardly a nod to the Bible. And that specificity shows up all the more sharply for me in the foreignness of virtually every moment of his existential tour of the church. Contrary to Lefebvre's assumption that such a tour provides a paradigmatic case of a church building, it is its indelibly Roman-Catholic nature that opens out into a space of representation.

But let me return to the strategy of such a space of representation, the search for a utopian spatialisation in a dialectical switchback from historical sediment to a glance of the new. I have suggested that this happens with his description of the church building: despite the overwhelming polemic, the Church emerges as a space of representation in which the ridiculed turns out to have some promise. But is this not the method of reading on which his whole effort to recover an earlier image of rural harmony relies upon? In other words, I have merely followed Lefebvre's own approach within the essay itself.

Chapter Five

The Ecumenism of Antonio Gramsci

> …both the Party and Religion are forms of world outlook.…[1]

Inexorably we draw closer to Rome, crossing not Lefebvre's Pyrenées to Spain, but the Alps to Italy. If the mountains seemed to block the specificity of the Roman-Catholic Church for Althusser and Lefebvre,[2] then Gramsci's nearness to the Papal See brings out such specificity all the more sharply. The more its immediate power becomes apparent, the less universal it appears to be. So it will turn out that Antonio Gramsci is much more responsive to the particular nature of the Roman-Catholic Church. He prints the word 'Roman' much more heavily than he does 'Catholic'.

Gramsci's catholicity, therefore, manifests itself not in the unwitting universality of his thought, but in the deep ecumenism of his thought. By ecumenism, I mean the whole range from the ecumenical movement to the deeper sense of the Greek word *oecumene*, the whole world. In this sense, Gramsci is thoroughly ecumenical, whether that lies in the ecumenical movement, an insatiable curiosity that runs all the way from the running of meetings to translation theory, refusal of polemics, interest in the

[1] Gramsci 1995, p. 115; Q8§131ii.
[2] Althusser and Balibar 1970.

Roman-Catholic Church as a model of a global political organisation, intellectuals in the Church, fascination with the Protestants and their Reformation, and the interest in 'other religions'. In the end, ecumenism in this chapter signals Gramsci's deep desire to draw lessons for communism from religion and the Church. I will argue that, in Gramsci's hands, it is a far more useful notion that the often unwitting universalism of Althusser and Lefebvre.

Wide is Gramsci's scope, and I am not fool enough to argue that all, or even most, of his concepts rely on the Roman-Catholic Church. Yet, there is a peculiar stamp that the Church leaves in his writings as he seeks out possibilities for communism and the party, particularly in the four areas of this chapter, namely ecumenism, the politics of a global Church, the intellectual, and, finally, the possibilities for communist change which he draws from the moral and intellectual reform of the Reformation. Apart from these influences, I enter a strange world in these texts. My Northern-European Calvinist heritage, full of Geneva, Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the Synod of Dort, John Knox and the rest of that motley crew, is still struck by the way everyday life was so heavily determined by the actions of Pope and Vatican. Gramsci, for his part, can speak of a Leo XIII, Piux IX or X or XI, Benedict XV or Gregory XVI, or of encyclicals like *Mirari vos* (1832), *Singulari nos* (1834), *Rerum Novarum* (1891), *Syllabus Errorum* (1864) as though they were part of everyday knowledge. His assumed knowledge has required on my part an immersion into the intricacies of Italian religious politics.

After the ambiguous passion of Althusser and Lefebvre regarding the Church, Gramsci's writings seem free of polemic. Apart from the occasional wry comment, and a few attacks,[3] Gramsci offers a measured analysis, seek-

[3] I found only five: 'Catholicism has been reduced to a large extent to the superstition held by the peasantry, the infirm, the elderly and women. What does the Church count for today in philosophy? In what state is Thomism the predominant philosophy among intellectuals? And socially speaking, where does the Church use its authority to command and direct social activities' (Gramsci 1995, p. 44; Q14§55)? And then there is: 'One of the most important measures that the church has devised to strengthen itself in the modern age is the *obligation* imposed on families to have their children receive first communion at *the age of seven*. It is easy to understand the psychological impact that the ceremonial trappings of the first communion must have on seven-year-old children – both as an individual family event and as a collective event – and what a source of terror and therefore of attachment to the church it becomes. It 'compromises' the mind of the child as soon as it is capable of reflection. It is understandable, then, that this measure has been resisted by families worried about the deleterious effects of this precocious mysticism on a child's mind; one can also see why the church has

ing to understand the intricate web of political, social, moral and theological questions of the Church's inescapable place in Italian society. Partly this is due to his unflagging curiosity. Time and again, he will note that a book or article, the latter most often drawn from the Jesuit journal *Civiltà Cattolica* or *Nuova Antologia*, is 'most important', or 'indispensable', requiring further study and research (a utopian gesture in prison, where bad health, poor food and inadequate clothes held out little hope for further study). But he was also fascinated since, in some of its key areas, such as Catholic Action or the 'caste' intellectuals or the internal struggles of integralists, modernists and Jesuits, the Roman-Catholic Church revealed features crucial for a reconsideration of communism.

There are four areas of Gramsci's writings on which I focus in this chapter. First, in the face of the official atheism of the Communist Party, Gramsci's interest in the ecumenical movement itself, the question of conversion, proselytisation, and a definition of religion itself, all speak most directly to what I have termed his ecumenism. Further, it seems to me that his reflections – on the institutional structure of the Roman-Catholic Church, its political status and machinations, concordats, internal debates, Catholic Action and the complexities of events in which the Church as the first global movement was a crucial player – resemble the type of complex analysis we find in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In short, the Roman-Catholic Church in Italy shows in relief the intricacies of the Church as a temporal and political institution.

---

been fighting to overcome this opposition' (Gramsci 1996, pp. 316–17; Q5§58; but compare Gramsci 1994b, Volume 2, p. 49). Thirdly: 'A critical-literary examination of the papal encyclicals. Ninety per cent of them consist of a mish-mash of vague, generic quotations whose aim seems to be to establish on each and every occasion the continuity of ecclesiastical doctrine from the gospels down to the current time. The Vatican must keep a formidable file of quotations on all arguments, so when an encyclical has to be compiled, a start is made by measuring out the necessary doses – so many quotations from the Gospels, so many from the Fathers of the Church, so many from previous encyclicals' (Gramsci 1995, pp. 100–1; Q6§163). Fourth: 'the value of Catholic "social thought" is purely academic: it should be studied and analysed as an ingredient of an ideological opiate aimed at maintaining certain religious kinds of moods of passive expectation' (Gramsci 1996, p. 274; Q5§7). Finally: 'Religious sentiment is entirely built up from these vague aspirations, these instinctive, inner reasonings, which have no outlet. And some trace, some quiver of this sentiment lurks within the blood of each one of us, even those who have best succeeded in dominating these inferior manifestations of the self – inferior because they are purely instinctive, mere uncontrolled impulses' (Gramsci 1994a, p. 14).

Thirdly, these texts on the Roman-Catholic Church skew one of Gramsci's key notions, namely, the organic or democratic intellectual. His interest in the clergy, the variations from region to region, the transitions from the clergy as a medieval class to a 'caste' of intellectuals, their moral and intellectual work to further the cause of the Church, constitutes a major slice of what he comes to describe as the organic intellectual.

Finally, another notion that takes on a completely different colour is that of moral and political reform, a central feature for a communist revolution – except that his model for such reform is the Protestant Reformation. In fact, I want to register my profound surprise to find the Reformers Luther and Calvin championed by Gramsci. In brief, Gramsci argues that the large-scale transformation the Reformers wrought in Northern Europe, in terms of culture, politics, economics and social organisation provides a paradigm for communist revolution in Italy and elsewhere. It is one of the only models for social change that worked its way through all levels of society. For Gramsci, Machiavelli becomes the 'Italian Luther', the one whose programme would have led to a comparable Italian Reformation had it been realised. Not only this: Machiavelli, particularly with his notion of the 'New Prince', becomes the source of possibilities for the Italian Communist Party.

Gramsci's writings on 'religion', then, are not only thoroughly ecclesial, but they exhibit the depth of the catholicity, understood here in terms of ecumenism, of his politics and thought. They function as an extraordinary example of what a more developed Marxist analysis of religion might look like. Except that his reflections come in various snippets and scraps, paragraphs scattered in the notebooks that even in a thematic arrangement jump about like an over-responsive road bicycle. They run in different directions, over-lay each other, tersely note a thought to be developed, comment on a series of articles in *Civiltà Cattolica*, appear to contradict until a deeper line of thought emerges. So I read closely those paragraphs that deal with 'religion', i.e. the Church, in both *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*[4] and the first five notebooks translated and edited by Joseph Buttigieg.[5]

[4] Gramsci 1995.
[5] Gramsci 1992, and Gramsci 1996.

Ecumenism

I begin with Gramsci's interest in the ecumenical movement – the coalition of the various Protestant and Orthodox Christian Churches. In characteristic fashion, he writes: 'The question of the unity of the Christian churches is a formidable post-war phenomenon that merits maximum attention and careful study'.[6] Gramsci is drawn by this movement, embodied most clearly now in the World Council of Churches, partly because it seeks to overcome the tendency of Protestantism to splinter rather than remain one diverse Church, and partly because the Roman Catholics – supposedly the one 'catholic' Church – studiously avoided the ecumenical movement. The paradox that emerges in such a refusal is that the notion of 'catholic' becomes a means of exclusion.

Gramsci does not come at the paradox of 'catholicism' in this fashion, but this is how I read his comments on the threat that the Roman-Catholic Church saw in the ecumenical movement. The alliance of Protestant and Orthodox Churches was perceived as an effort to produce a united front in order to 'lay siege to Catholicism in order to make it renounce its primacy'.[7] And it is this unity that threatens the ability of Rome to absorb heretics and schismatics. In response, the Roman Catholics organised in September 1928 a social week in Milan on the theme of 'True Religious Unity'. Herein lies the profound contradiction of 'catholicism', for the claim to be a universal church involves the claim to be the only church. Indeed, within the Roman-Catholic Church, the traditional category of an ecumenical council, which may only be called by the pope, is restricted to that Church alone. Instead of the Protestant doctrine that the universal Church is an invisible entity made up of all believers, the Roman-Catholic position is inextricably tied to the earth-based institution. Yet this internal consistency of the Roman Catholics – there can be only one catholic Church – leads to the paradox that the notion of 'catholicity' can operate only by exclusion. Here, the idea of a singular institution runs up against an inclusive one, and this goes back to the first assertion by the Church in Rome to be the 'Catholic' Church in the early years of the common era. Not only was this claim made in response to the Orthodox Churches who had broken away,

[6] Gramsci 1996, p. 282; Q5§17.
[7] Ibid.

but also to exclude various sundry groups such as the Donatists, Gnostics and Manichaeans, to whom Augustine belonged before he came to champion the 'Catholic' Church over against his former mentors. The Roman Catholics are trapped: they cannot agree to enter the ecumenical movement on equal terms with the other churches, for this would require relinquishing their claim to be the only viable Christian Church. And yet, by not entering, they not only leave themselves open to the reproach of the churches in the ecumenical movement that Rome is not interested in Christian unity, but also that they are in fact an exclusive institution.[8]

Does Gramsci sidestep such a paradox in his own reflections, both on the Christian Churches and communism itself? The trick here is to avoid the position of a singular party to the exclusion of others with whom one may share certain positions. Gramsci was given, before his imprisonment, to his own battles with various forms of the Left before the establishment of the Italian Communist Party, but I want to argue that he was continually seeking in the *Prison Notebooks* for various lessons and possible forms of allegiance. The distinct contrast with both Althusser and Lefebvre, who could barely contain their disdain for the Church, is that Gramsci does not feel the need for polemic. As I have indicated above, I want to designate this largeness of vision Gramsci's own *ecumenism*, reminiscent of but much deeper than Althusser's early efforts to seek an alliance between the Church and communism. For Gramsci, the value of ecumenism is that it showed up both the limits and the possibilities for the various communist parties.

The first step in such an exploration of the ecumenical movement is to locate an alternative notion of 'catholicism' that is inclusive rather than exclusive, one that enables an alliance politics and the establishment of a federation which grants equal rights to all. And Gramsci finds it in the position of Nathan Söderblom, the Swedish Lutheran bishop, scholar of comparative religion, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, and one of the founders of the ecumenical movement. For Söderblom, the mark of an 'evangelical Catholicism' is the 'direct attachment to Christ' and nothing more.[9] Gramsci notes that the former Roman Catholic, Professor Friedrich Heiler, comes to the same

[8] See Gramsci 1996, pp. 386–7; Q5§134.
[9] Gramsci 1996, p. 132; Q3§164.

conclusion, commenting cryptically that 'the pan-Christians have had some success'.[10]

But we need to push Gramsci a little, searching for the implications of his cryptic comments concerning the ecumenical movement. Although one would want to question the particular content of Söderblom's statement, especially in light of an unflagging suspicion of redeemer or saviour figures that I have acquired over the last few years (see the chapter on Adorno later in this book), the success of his position is that it reconfigures the correlation of catholicity and singularity. The singular institution of the Church now becomes an inclusive unity, still held together by a singular statement and singular figure. In one respect, the boundaries have, of course, been moved (Jews and Muslims, for instance, would have a hard time being accepted, although one can imagine a limited valorisation of Jesus Christ being sufficient), but in terms of Christianity itself, the definition of catholicity is no longer a strategy of exclusion but inclusion.

Gramsci's fascination is not merely due to his soft spot for the Protestants, but rather to the profound political implications. Here we have, for the first time, a challenge to the oldest globalising movement in human history, precisely by those churches that broke away and were excluded from that global 'Catholic' Church. How is it, I can sense Gramsci asking, that a comparable politics might be developed? Not merely a common front of left parties, but a communist party that, in terms of its own universalising logic, is able to hand out the membership card to as many as possible.

Another factor entices Gramsci as well, namely the schismatic tendency of the Protestants. At first reading, this seems to be a mere reiteration of the Roman-Catholic criticism of Protestantism – that it cannot be the true church since it keeps breaking up and forming ever new denominations. But Gramsci's interest is also very much a political one. Given that the Left exhibits many of the same tendencies to fragment – into Leninists, Trotskyists, Maoists, anarchists, Food not Bombs, and so on – the question then becomes one of alliance politics. Does the ecumenical movement provide an alternative model from the 'massive organisation and centralization' and 'single command' of the Roman-Catholic Church?[11] Instead of dispersing and absorbing

[10] Ibid.; see Gramsci 1992, pp. 354–5; Q2§135.
[11] Gramsci 1996, p. 386; Q5§134.

the sundry heretics and schismatics, is there room for a variety of positions, operating on equal terms, without any one of them seeking to soak up and dominate the others?

Ecumenism as a distinctly Christian phenomenon remains Gramsci's forte, but his lines of inquiry do run to the ragged edges of Christendom in both territorial (India, China and so on) and religious (Judaism, Hinduism, Islam) directions. Here, he is on less sure footing, reliant on scattered pieces in the journals *Civiltà Cattolica* and *Nuova Antologia*. Out of his diverse notes, I will take up the question of conversion.[12]

In my earlier discussion of Gramsci's fascination with the ecumenical movement, I picked up various facets – overcoming fragmentation, the challenge to the Roman-Catholic Church, bypassing the paradox of 'catholicity' by redefining the term – but I have held off on one item, namely the renewed ability of the ecumenical movement for proselytising. This question also emerges in his various notes on religion in countries such as India or China. Both situations, the ecumenical movement and the encounters between different religious systems outside Europe, turn on the issue of conversion.

Let me begin with the material from India. Gramsci cites briefly the examples of Upadhyaya Brahmabandhav and Sadhu Sundar Singh, the former a Roman-Catholic convert, the latter a Protestant. The Christian missions in India were never particularly successful, compared with Korea, Africa or the Pacific Islands. Both Brahmabandhav and Singh come under the criticism of the Vatican. In Brahmabandhav's case, it was not so much his homeopathic approach, the desire to transform various aspects of Hinduism from within in order to render it Roman-Catholic, as his nationalistic fervour that drew Rome's ire. Singh, a follower of Gandhi, committed the cardinal sin of converting not to Roman Catholicism but to Protestantism. These details on Singh are not, in fact, provided by Gramsci, for he merely notes his name and the articles of *Civiltà Cattolica* that deal with him. Already, my own comments on these two exceed those of Gramsci, so the question is not the analysis that Gramsci himself provides, but why he notes precisely these men and the issue of conversion. It seems that the issue and process of conversion itself, from

[12] Other materials, such as the long note on China (Gramsci 1996, pp. 285–92; Q5§23) touch on religion only obliquely, as do the notes on Japan (Gramsci 1996, pp. 305–8; Q5§50) and Islam (Gramsci 1996, pp. 344–6; Q5§90) that list information on Japanese and Islamic religion and culture for the purpose of understanding intellectuals.

one comprehensive and vastly different belief system to another, is what draws him in.

However, Gramsci does not leave us to guess concerning his interest in prosletysing. The cryptic notes on Brahmabandhav and Singh, stripped of any analysis, come up against the more sustained consideration of the conversion of intellectuals in India. As we shall see later, Gramsci's key category of the intellectuals cannot be understood without their role as religious professionals in the various religious traditions. In this case, the problem lies in the resistance of Indian intellectuals to Christianity. Conversion has been limited to the lower castes, he observes,[13] but, as far as the Roman Catholics are concerned, this process does not come at the heart of the matter. Such conversion is molecular and piecemeal; what the Pope wants is mass conversion and, in order to achieve this, the intellectuals need to be won over first.

In the immediacy of his reflections on conversions in India, Gramsci is quite enamoured with the Pope's astuteness in such matters and the methods the Jesuits undertake in order to understand Indian society and religion and so convert it wholesale. I will return to the question of individual or molecular conversion in a moment, but what Gramsci has done here is pick up the constitutive feature of the Roman-Catholic approach to conversion and the Christian life.

The aim of such missionary activity is at one with the raising of children in Roman-Catholic societies. If every aspect of one's life is saturated with the myths, language and synaptic patterns of Roman Catholicism, then one has no option but to believe. No other world is possible. Characteristic not merely of the world in which Christianity was the unquestioned cultural dominant, which Gramsci will mark as having passed with 1848 and the need for the Roman-Catholic Church to establish its own political party to look out for its own interests, this social, cultural and religious saturation and envelopment remains part of the agenda of the Roman Catholics today with their schools, sporting and cultural organisations and so forth.

Transferred to an environment in which such a comprehensive envelope does not surround each person from the moment of birth, the deeper logic remains the same, except that it now takes a step back. Missionary activity becomes a process of transforming the entire social and cultural environment

[13] See Gramsci 1995, pp. 123–4; Q7§71.

into a Roman-Catholic one. For this reason, the Jesuits seek 'an exact knowledge of the ideologies and ways of thinking of these [Indian] intellectuals so as to have a better understanding of the organisation of cultural and moral hegemony in order to destroy or assimilate it'.[14] Theirs is not merely an abstract intellectual exercise but one with 'concrete practical goals'.[15]

The model Gramsci explores here is collective, although with a twist. In the end, it is a trickle-down notion of conversion, one that relies on the leadership of intellectuals. Again, I need to ask, what is the importance of proselytising and conversion for Gramsci? By now, it should be rather transparent: how can the communist movement itself enhance its own distinctly political form of proselytising? Here, the analogy between Marxism and Christianity, or between religion and communism more broadly, works to the favour rather than detriment of both. For does not Marxism seek to attract members to a superior political programme? Does not a form of political 'conversion' take place?

And his language indicates the distinctly political interest he has in the missionary activities of the Jesuits in India. Apart from the need to understand the structure of the 'cultural and moral hegemony' of Indian society in order to transform it, the Pope himself becomes an astute operator of the machinery of conversion:

> The Pope knows the mechanism of cultural reform of the popular-peasant masses better than many secular left elements: he knows that one cannot convert a great mass in molecular fashion but that, to hasten the process, it is necessary either to conquer the natural leaders of the great masses, in other words the intellectuals, or to form groups of intellectuals of a new type, hence the creation of native bishops.[16]

Without trying too hard, we can see here what is by now Gramsci's classic formation of the role of the organic or democratic intellectuals as well as the party in the revolutionary process. Except that the shock lies with his identification of the pope as a much more knowing agent in such a process than 'many secular left elements'. Not that he imposes this strategy on an

---

[14] Gramsci 1995, p. 123; Q7§71.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

unwitting pope; rather, it is from the Roman Catholics, past masters at mass conversions and comprehensive programmes of conversion, that he wishes to gain some experience.

Is the Pope, then, an unwitting revolutionary? Hardly, for it is the lesson to be learned from the first truly global organisation that pushes Gramsci this far. If this is the sum of all that Gramsci can say concerning conversion, then he is indeed guilty of a far-reaching 'catholicity' that merely extends the specific sense of 'catholic' in Roman Catholicism: the unwitting assumption that the ways of this Church are indeed universal in a monolithic sense that brooks no alternative.

Gramsci does, in fact, explore another model of conversion from the ecumenical movement itself, but, before I come to that, I want to comment on the Indian situation that elicits his comments in the first place and then consider the neglected element of molecular conversion. On the first point, I have the advantage of hindsight: the majority of Christians today in India are from the lower castes, especially that of the *dalits*, or indigenous people. Gramsci also notes that the majority of converts are among the lower castes. He writes this off as too molecular, but the appeal of Christianity in India is that it has enabled the *dalits* to step out of the caste system, at least in religious terms. The edge of many Christian missions with which the Brahmins were not enamoured was the biblical text: in Christ 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is nether slave nor free, there is neither male nor female' (Galations 3: 28). Now, while the passage has its own problems, the use of it in India as an anti-caste message resonated most strongly with the *dalits* and other lower castes. Given the sheer population of India, even the relatively small percentage of Christians makes the Christian Church, in all its branches, one of the largest in the world. What Gramsci does not consider is the possibility that such a moral and intellectual reform can take place from the masses, from the bottom up.

However, the other element that he neglects is the question of molecular conversion. Indeed, for me, the immediate model of conversion that comes to mind is the thoroughly individualised and Protestant one of personal transformation and commitment. The catch with such a model of conversion is that it denies the other dimension that I have considered above with regard to the Roman Catholics: the absence of any definable moment of conversion, the sense that one has always been a believer in some way or another. Yet, all I have done is set up two ideal types, the shock of personal conversion and

the collective sense of always having believed, for it will turn out that the personal moment of conversion felt by endless numbers of people is part of the ideological structure of what it means to have faith. That moment has itself been set up, replete with its recognisable patterns of experience and verbal narration, by a long process of formation. Conversion is, therefore, a collective experience, one that is part of the social and cultural makeup of the churches themselves.

But what happens when there is no cultural dominant of religion, no long tradition, no institutional and cultural matrix for such commitment, formalised and ritualised at the moment of confession and confirmation? The question is no different for the communist party seeking to win 'converts' or for a religious body such as the Christian Church. Here, one may impose the structures in the anticipation that these will eventually condition belief, beginning with winning over the intellectuals and engaging in mass initiations (the Roman-Catholic missionary approach), or seek to win 'souls' through individual commitment after being exposed to the gospel (the preferred Protestant method). In some future society, one may expect the cultural and political pervasiveness of communism to make commitment easier, but in the situation of urging people to switch allegiance – for conversion, or metanoia, is, in the end, a switch from one belief system to another – how is the communist party to proceed?

Thus far, I have concerned myself with Gramsci's deliberations on the Roman-Catholic model in India. But there is an alternative at which he hints, and here I return to the other dimension of his interest in conversion or proselytising, namely the ecumenical movement itself. The aim of the movement is not merely unity, he suggests, but also the acquisition of a 'proselytizing force'[17] that was characteristic only of the English and American Churches.[18] As one of the few expansionist religions in the world, including Buddhism and Islam, Christianity is normally characterised by the removal of ethnic, linguistic and geographical boundaries to membership. The bar is set quite low, allowing in anyone who confesses belief. Yet, Gramsci's point is quite astute, for in the vast missionary effort of the colonial era, it was only the various Roman-Catholic countries such as Spain and France, along with the

[17] Gramsci 1996, p. 386; Q5§134.
[18] See also Gramsci 1992, pp. 354–5; Q2§135.

English and then American Protestants who consistently sent out missionaries to the colonies. There were exceptions, such as the Lutheran missions in central Australia, but along with the obligatory missionaries sent by individual Protestant denominations the first properly ecumenical bodies were the missionary organisations themselves. Gramsci does not make this point, but the role of the London Missionary Society, for instance, throughout the globe is what has been often called a para-church organisation. Drawing missionaries from all of the Protestant churches in England, Scotland and Wales, as well as the various administrators of the organisation itself, it provided a model of the ecumenical movement to come. What Gramsci was not able to foresee was the shift that the ecumenical movement would enact between the older colonial centres and the targets of missionary activity themselves. It would only be a matter of time before these countries too would become members of the World Council of Churches, eventually to reset its whole agenda, call for a moratorium on proselytising itself, and find that there were more Christians in what has been called the Third World than in the colonial centres.

But how does the ecumenical movement, a union of Protestant and Orthodox Churches, provide an alternative model of conversion from that of the Roman Catholics? It is not so much that the dispersed groups of the Left should form a united front in order to convince more people to join, but that the model of the 'federation of the different Christian sects, with equal rights for all'[19] is itself not a model from which to launch proselytisation but, rather, the result of that process. If this smacks too much of liberal pluralism, allowing everyone to remain exactly as they are, then it neglects the profound change that is required not only for a commitment to communism, but also for such a federation to come together in the first place, let alone exist for any time.

The ecumenical movement, at least implicitly, provides an alternative model for proselytisation than the monolithic structure of the Roman-Catholic Church, and Gramsci is interested in the implications. Rather than the trickle-down effect of focusing on the moral and cultural leaders, that is, the (religious) intellectuals, he hints at the possibility that proselytising may take the form not of swamping and absorbing that which is different into one's own system, however much that system may be transformed itself in the process,

[19] Gramsci 1996, p. 282; Q5§17.

but of a different type of federation in which the various emphases and traditions may continue to exist without giving up their peculiar autonomies.

Politics: the 'Eighteenth Brumaire' of the Holy See

> One must not think of 'ideology' or doctrine as something artificial and mechanically superimposed… but rather as something historically produced, as a ceaseless struggle.[20]

Unlike Althusser, Lefebvre and Eagleton, Gramsci never seems to have had a period of religious commitment, a youthful passion that was to fade with the sensibilities of adulthood. Despite the fact that the Church permeated everyday life in his home on Sardinia, he was always outside the community of the faithful, describing himself wryly as 'someone who has not as yet been blessed with the grace of being able to penetrate within the secret of the language of the Saints'.[21] In view of Gramsci's avowal of his outsider status, why is he so interested in the details of the Church's inner workings? The longest and most developed entries concern precisely these matters: Catholic Action, Church congresses, the various concordats, papal encyclicals, Italian politics and the perpetual to and fro of church-state relations. And, unless one has a somewhat perverse interest in the detailed workings of church history, I would be tempted to skim over them, scouring the table for more delectable morsels. But there are some tasty pieces here too, although in the most unlikely places. My concern here is with three dimensions of the Roman-Catholic Church's politics: Catholic Action, the in-fighting between modernists, integralists and Jesuits, and the Church's political alliances.

Catholic Action

I am going infiltrate Catholic Action for a while, before moving on to reflect on Gramsci's treatment of the Roman-Catholic Church's internal conflicts and then its political and social policy, especially its confusing series of apparently opportunistic alliances. Gramsci is deeply interested not because,

---

[20] Gramsci 1996, p. 56; Q3§56.
[21] Gramsci 1995, p. 54; Q25§1.

like Althusser, he was once a member, but because Catholic Action provides him with an opportunity to reflect on the nature and practice of the communist party.

Catholic Action draws Gramsci time and again, but it is a Catholic Action distinct from that which is familiar to us in Althusser's France (even though Gramsci regards the French arm as better qualified and organised).[22] With characteristic insight, Gramsci points out that the widely known Catholic Action of the sort that drew in Althusser was in fact a thorough re-organisation undertaken by Pius XI (1922–39). He does note the activities in which Althusser was swept up, although in Italy they took less the form of associations of workers, students and so on (but then, in France, the Roman-Catholic Church had been disestablished) and more the form of retreats or 'closed spiritual exercises' modelled on Ignatius Loyola. Built around a core of devout workers, the retreats sought to inculcate an active spirituality amongst an increasingly apostate working class, who tended to be 'negative, or at least passive or skeptical and indifferent'.[23] All of this took place in the early twentieth century. Yet Gramsci pushes much further back: although there were antecedents from the French Revolution of 1789, the crucial moment is that of the revolutions that shook Europe in 1848. If Lukács could see the demise of the historical novel proper in 1848, when the bourgeoisie met for the first time the working class as an organised and militant group and hastily began forgetting its own recent emergence, then Gramsci locates a comparable moment for the Roman-Catholic Church. For the first time, it needed a specific political party to support it. And this process continues:

> To the extent that every national Catholic Action grows and becomes a mass organisation, it tends to become a real and proper party, whose orientations are dictated by the internal necessities of the organisation.[24]

1848 marks the shift for the Church from an assumed and unquestioned position of universal dominance to one of having to defend itself:

> Before 1848 one saw the formation of more or less ephemeral parties and single individuals who rebelled against Catholicism while, after 1848,

---

[22] See Gramsci 1995, p. 105; Q15§40.
[23] Gramsci 1996, pp. 385 and 386; Q5§133; see Gramsci 1995, p. 48; Q7§78.
[24] Gramsci 1995, p. 108; Q8§129.

> Catholicism and the Church 'had' to have a party of their own to defend themselves and lose the least possible amount of ground. They could no longer speak as if they knew they were the necessary and universal premiss of any mode of thought or action (except officially, since the Church will never admit the irrevocability of this state of affairs).[25]

The sheer pervasiveness, the untranscendable horizon, of a Christian and more specifically Roman-Catholic world-view before 1848 is one that is hard to imagine in the thoroughly secular, or what is now more often called the post-secular, world. As an analogy, Gramsci suggests we might think of the impossibility of an anti-suicide party. Given the universal assumption or necessary premise of life, there would be no need for a party that set itself against the practice of suicide. Only if life were no longer such an unquestioned assumption would such a party become necessary.

Gramsci searches for the intricate precursors of Catholic Action before 1848, from the contradictory influence of Lamennais, who provided both the theoretical basis for Catholic Action and was condemned as the first Catholic modernist, to neo-Guelphism,[26] Sanfedistas,[27] the leftward liberal-democratic and bourgeois Action Party, and the burgeoning Roman-Catholic periodicals set up to combat the ideas of the Encyclopaedia and the French Revolution.[28] But what was the event of 1848 that led to such a shift in the Church's position? It was the same victory of a conservative liberalism and the bourgeoisie that simultaneously crushed the newly emergent communists *and* removed the Church from its dominant position. I will pick up this bifurcation that the bourgeoisie enacted between an old order and one that was only in the first stage of its emergence below, but it means that the anti-clericalism of

---

[25] Gramsci 1995, p. 29; Q20§1; see Gramsci 1992, pp. 223–4; Q1§139. Or, in Q20§2, 'Catholic Action marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the Catholic religion – the moment when, from an all-embracing [totalitarian] conception (in the dual sense – that it was a total world-conception of a society in its entirety) it became partial (that too in the dual sense) and had to have its own party' (Gramsci 1995, p. 34). See also Gramsci 1995, p. 36; Q6§183; Gramsci 1995, pp. 43–4; Q14§55.

[26] Neo-Guelphists were nationalist and anti-Austrian, pushing, in the curious mix of the time (1848–9), both for a return to the Medieval Church and for the Pope to gather a confederation of Italian states.

[27] Or Santa Fede, the 'Holy Faith' militants who, like the neo-Guelphists, wanted independence from Austria with the Pope as the political and religious head of Italy (see Gramsci 1995, pp. 35–9; Q6§183; Q6§188; Q7§98).

[28] See Gramsci 1995, pp. 35–9; Q6§183; Q6§188; Q7§98.

Italy, the often military struggle against the Church, all of which ended in a right-wing liberalism sweeping the field – 'understood as a conception of the world as well as particular political current'[29] – was combined with the horror and brutal repression of the first organised movement of the working class. As far as the Church is concerned, we saw in the discussion of Althusser that the victory of the bourgeoisie over the Church resulted in the slide from the Church itself as the dominant ideological state apparatus to that of education, the major site of the inculcation of liberal values and culture. Or, as Gramsci puts it in the following entry in Notebook Twenty:

> It is no longer the Church that determines the battlefield and weapons; it has instead to accept the terrain imposed on it by the adversaries or by general indifference and make use of the arms borrowed from the adversaries' arsenal (the mass political organisation).[30]

In other words, Catholic Action arose through the impossibility of the Restoration, the return to the Ancien Régime.

Apart from his polemic against the Roman-Catholic historians,[31] who see Catholic Action stemming from the movements of the time of Christ (was he not, after all, the first leader of a Catholic Action group?), it seems to me that Gramsci's argument has distinct ramifications for his theory of the communist party. In the case of the Church, the argument is retrospective: once it had lost the position of 'necessary and universal premiss', then it required a party to look after its own interests, despite its reluctance to recognise this. If we reverse the temporal order, precisely at the point where one loses its supremacy and the other only begins its long struggle for hegemony, then, for the time being, the working class and the masses need the communist party to espouse its own interests, to struggle for a myriad number of workers' causes. But all of these are only temporary measures, at times in profound tension with the long-term aims of the party. Once communism itself has become the necessary and universal premise of society and culture, then the party itself will no longer be required, dissipating into a newly dominant worldview that requires no defence.

---

[29] Gramsci 1995, p. 29; Q20§1.
[30] Gramsci 1995, p. 34; Q20§2.
[31] See also Gramsci 1995, p. 36; Q6§183.

This is, of course, a version, with Gramsci's own twist, of the Marxist-Leninist theory of the party and the temporary dictatorship of the proletariat. I am not sure whether Gramsci's insight into the function of Catholic Action was enabled by such a theory, now thrown into historical reverse, or whether the history of Catholic Action provides a distinct insight into the function of the party. Except that the dichotomy is a false one, unless we want to distance Marxism from religion, specifically Christianity, with its Church, scriptures and clergy. Rather than back off from the implications, I would rather take them further, arguing that it is precisely because of these likenesses that Marxism has the appeal and strength that it does. In the same way that a religion like Christianity provides a complete narrative not only of human life, or even of that which comes before and after the life span of a biological individual, but also of the place of human beings within the vast sweep of history and society, of both a global and universal nature, so also Marxism is able to provide a narrative of the comparable breadth and depth. Or, as Gramsci puts it: 'Socialism is a whole vision of life: it has its philosophy, its own faith, its own morality'.[32]

It seems to me that this is the level at which Gramsci's analysis of Catholic Action, as a distinct party comparable to the communist party and its function with the working masses, operates. And this is why it matters little, in the end, as to whether the insight comes from his Marxist presuppositions or from his study of the Church, for both gain strength from one another, rather than depleting each other as they struggle for the same territory.

My suggestion that Catholic Action provides potential sources for understanding the possibilities of communist-party politics carries through into Gramsci's reflections both on the regional variations of Catholic Action[33] and his notes on congresses, of all things. Let me focus on the second, with which Gramsci fills the remainder of the first long entry from Notebook Twenty[34] – the one I have been trailing now for a while. To begin with, in discussing the

---

[32] Gramsci 1994a, p. 37.

[33] See further on Germany (Gramsci 1995, p. 108; Q8§129; Gramsci 1992, pp. 267–8; Q2§20; Gramsci 1996, pp. 284–5; Q5§22; Gramsci 1996, p. 317; Q5§59), Austria (Gramsci 1995, p. 108; Q8§129), France (Gramsci 1995, pp. 105–6; Q15§40; Gramsci 1996, p. 275; Q5§9; Gramsci 1996, p. 281; Q5§15) and the United States (Gramsci 1996, p. 316; Q5§57; Gramsci 1995, pp. 110–12; Q6§187).

[34] See also Gramsci 1992, pp. 122–4; Q1§38.

national congresses of the 'white', i.e. Roman-Catholic, trade unions and the Popular Party, he identifies a contradiction between these relatively democratic arms of Catholic Action and the hierarchy of the Church itself, which had honed its anti-democratic skills over the centuries. As Gramsci points out, the Roman-Catholic Church opted for the line that a little bit of democracy, suitably kept in check, was better than a potential populist subversion of the structure of Catholic Action and the eventual threat brought to the gates of the Holy See itself.

But this observation about the various arms of Catholic Action then moves into a series of points and questions that seem to require further reflection: the agenda of conferences, choosing of leaders, relations between the social composition of the congresses and of the movement as a whole, adults and youth, the role of subordinate and subsidiary organisations, the press, the agrarian question, the relation between the political centre and trade unions, and so on. In the end, he spins out into a discussion of the press, journalist that he was. But what interests me about these notes and points is that they begin specifically with Catholic Action and its congresses, but, by the time we get to the reportage of parliamentary debates, he is speaking about political parties *per se*. For instance:

> The doctrinal and political homogeneity of a party can also be tested by the following criterion: what are the orientations favoured by party members in their collaboration with the [news]papers of another tendency or with the so-called organs of public opinion?[35]

And, if we track back to the earlier points, it becomes difficult to ascertain whether Gramsci is in fact speaking about Catholic Action and its trade-union and parliamentary arms – as he does at certain points – or whether he is making notes and recommendations for the function of any party, especially the communist party and its congresses. I will restrict myself to one earlier example:

> The agenda ought to spring from the concrete problems that have compelled attention in between one Congress and the next and from future perspectives,

[35] Gramsci 1995, p. 33; Q20§1.

> as well as from those points of doctrine around which general currents of opinion are formed and factions come to group themselves.[36]

I want to suggest that this inability to distinguish between Catholic Action, the party as a generic category and the communist party, is another dimension to the point I made above concerning the shift in 1848 that brought about Catholic Action in the first place. In other words, the detailed workings of Catholic Action, its various arms and the apparently mundane matter of the congresses, all enable reflections on the operation of the communist party. This is merely the weak version of a point that should be much stronger: Gramsci seeks to strengthen the operations of the communist party by keeping a close watch on Catholic Action, for, in the end, it is an analogous movement with a wholesale social, ideological and political agenda. And this shows up even more clearly at the moments he does not realise, which, in this case, is the inadvertent slippage back and forth between observing Catholic Action and tips for running better congresses.

Internal conflict: integralists, Jesuits and modernists

Comparable to Gramsci's efforts to track the twisting paths of Catholic Action are his comments on the battles between integralists, modernists and Jesuits. On the inside of the thick stone walls of the Church, the intricate weave of theological debates are also for Gramsci very much political. Thus, the differences between integralists, moderates (Jesuits) and modernists become for him an intriguing investigation into the political problems of the struggle for hegemony and centralised rule. Whereas Catholic Action interests him as the political party of the Roman-Catholic Church, the internal battles of the Church can provide some insight into the effects of such conflicts on the political programme of the Church.

I begin with what may be taken as a central assessment of the conflicts before describing the conflicts themselves. After speaking of the various alliances and activities of the three groups, Gramsci writes:

> All this shows that the cohesive force of the Church is much less than is commonly thought, not only because of the fact that the growing indifference

[36] Gramsci 1995, p. 31; Q20§1.

> of the mass of the faithful for purely religious or ecclesiastical questions attaches a very relative value to superficial and apparent ideological homogeneity, but also because of the much more serious fact that the Church centre is impotent to clear the field completely of the organised forces engaged in conscious struggle within the Church itself.[37]

The impression of a united front, of one Church, one Faith, one Lord, is precisely that, a front. Gramsci holds less store by the lack of concern for unity among the faithful than in the inability of the 'Church centre' to deal with organised internal conflict. To my mind, this last point is the key to Gramsci's interest in the battles between modernists, integralists and Jesuits: the deep political struggles within the Church weaken its effectiveness as a political organisation. I will return to this point below, but not before some reflection on these three groups.

It would be easy to characterise the three groups on a political spectrum from left to right, from the modernists through to the integralists. But Gramsci does not fall into this mistake, for the modernists were merely the liberals, as we saw with Lefebvre. Belatedly concerned to bring the Roman Catholics into contact with not-so-modern thought (something the Protestants had been vigorously pursuing for some time, although not without conflict and angst), the modernists desperately wanted the Church to become a little more progressive. Reading the modernists today, they come through as mainstream supporters of the *status quo*. They were, in other words, good old liberals.

I will not repeat the brief outline of Roman-Catholic modernism that I produced in the chapter on Lefebvre, but it is worth noting that, apart from one moment, Gramsci tends all too readily to take modernism as a distinct movement within the Roman-Catholic Church, full of covert and agonistic operations.[38] In this respect, he merely takes up the descriptions of modernism in the various encyclicals and Church documents, which give the impression of a well-organised and coherent movement. A little like basing one's knowledge of the heresies of the early Christian Church on the polemical texts of the various heresy hunters. As for the modernists, there was never any great sense of a movement as such, but rather a common agenda that had myriad forms and a number of significant names, such as Alfred Loisy, George Tyrell, Friedrich

---

[37] Gramsci 1995, p. 78; Q20§4i.
[38] See Gramsci 1995, p. 78; Q20§4(i); Gramsci 1995, p. 95; Q6§195.

von Hugel and Italy's own Ernesto Buonaiuti (author of *Il programma dei modernisti* in 1907, translated into English by Tyrell and A. Leslie Lilly). Gramsci's interest in Joseph Turmel, who was not a major figure by any means, seems to be determined more by the similarity of Turmel's clandestine practices to the integralists than any theological depth.[39]

By contrast, the integralists were just so highly organised, and Gramsci notes with some amusement on a number of occasions the codes (the Pope was, for instance, 'Baroness Micheline'), secret signals, vendettas, insinuations, gossip, slander, libel, scandal sheets and pamphlets along with underground conspiracies of leaders such as Umberto Benigni in Italy and Cardinal Billot in France.[40] Their target was mostly the Jesuits, given their power in the Vatican itself under Pius XI, but also the modernists, with whom they often lumped the Jesuits. And the integralists' agenda: coming to the fore under Piux X, they loved the *Syllabus Errorum* (so do I, but for different reasons), maintained an almost Jansenist 'great moral and religious rigour'[41] and sought to keep the Church on a straight, narrow and undeviating path. Drawing close to Charles Maurras's proto-fascist Action Française, the integralists stepped over an invisible line, threatening the effectiveness of Catholic Action and a Roman-Catholic popular political party in France. The Jesuits had their day when Pius XI took action against Action Française, the fatal mistake being the support of the overt atheist, Maurras.[42] In other words, the integralists made the relatively right-wing Jesuits[43] look like a moderate centre party of a Church that had already assumed 'the mummified shape of a formalistic and absolutist organism' which 'hangs together only by virtue of the rigidity typical of a paralytic'.[44]

---

[39] Turmel's only claim to any notoriety was that, for twenty years, from 1908–29, he wrote articles and books under a host of pseudonyms, refuting himself again and again under yet another new name, until found out purely by chance and excommunicated (see Gramsci 1995, pp. 94–7; Q6§195, Q20§4(iv)).

[40] See Gramsci 1995, pp. 77–9; Q20§4(i); Gramsci 1995, p. 82; Q20§4(ii); Gramsci 1995, pp. 86–8; Q20§20(ii).

[41] Gramsci 1995, p. 77; Q20§4(i).

[42] See Gramsci 1995, pp. 80–94; Q20§4(ii), Q20§4(iii), Q20§4(v), Q13§37, Q13§38; Gramsci 1992, pp. 155–61; Q1§48; Gramsci 1992, pp. 194–5; Q1§106; Gramsci 1996, p. 278; Q5§14; Gramsci 1996, pp. 391–4; Q5§141.

[43] Gramsci is not particularly sympathetic to the Jesuits: 'Jesuitism is an advance when compared to idolatry, but it is an obstacle to the development of modern civilization' (Gramsci 1992, p. 195; Q1§107).

[44] Gramsci 1995, p. 83; Q20§4(ii).

But let me return to the modernists, who are far more intriguing and enigmatic, especially Gramsci's astute observations in the fifty-second entry of Notebook Fourteen. Contrary to his tendency to take modernism as a clandestine movement, of whom Turmel then becomes an extreme paradigm, here he distinguishes between what the modernists' enemies say of them and what they themselves say, observing that it is 'a complex and multi-faceted movement'.[45] The distinction that follows is the most important one: modernism may be understood both as a politico-social manifestation and as a scientific-religious one. I begin with the latter: here, Gramsci means the appropriation and use of what is commonly called historical criticism of the Bible (the investigation of oral and written sources and their compilation) and a new consideration of theology and dogma, particularly with a teleological bent. Both of these were sweeping through the various Protestant churches of the time, not without controversy and usually gathered under the label of 'liberalism', and the modernists felt the incursions of such a liberalism into Roman Catholicism was well-nigh overdue.

Yet, for Gramsci, the 'scientific-religious' side of modernism is not where the edge lay. Rather, through their liberal bent that often tended to mild forms of reformist socialism, the modernists triggered the ire of the integralists, with their aristocratic and often fascist connections and leanings. In short, politically, the modernists would rather the Church be of the popular classes, and this the integralists could not stand.

In itself, the distinction between what might be called the ideological and the political, or what Gramsci calls the scientific-religious and the politico-social, is nothing startling. He is not the first to have observed the political and social dimensions of the Roman-Catholic Church's theological debates (or those of any other Christian Church, for that matter). The emphasis on the political rather than the theological side of modernism has its own background in Gramsci's Marxism, but the main reason for the distinction is, as I have already suggested on other issues, to be found in his desire to deal with the Church as a possible model concerning the nature, activities and problems of communism.

Underlying the preceding discussion has been the initial point I made, namely that Gramsci's interest in the conflicts between modernists, integralists

---

[45] Gramsci 1995, p. 97; Q14§52.

and Jesuits has the distinct political motive of tracing the weakening effects of such deep conflicts on an organisation like the Church. I should add at least two further factors, the battle for hegemony and the problems of rule for such a global organisation.

On the first point, Gramsci writes of modernists, integralists and Jesuits as those '…who represent the three "organic" tendencies of Catholicism, i.e. they are the forces fighting for hegemony within the Roman Church…'.[46] Hegemony is, for Gramsci, not merely the mechanism of ideological dominance, by means of both force and consent, but, more importantly, a term developed in order to theorise the process of revolution. Nor is an 'organic' individual, most often associated with intellectuals, simply one who is integrally connected with the popular classes in a dialectic of theory and practice. The term 'organic' bears with it a revolutionary urgency, the look forward to winning the struggle for hegemony. As far as the Roman-Catholic Church is concerned, the struggle within the organisation for hegemony is both a microcosm of broader political struggles within society as a whole and a signal of the importance of such disputes for the nature and future of the party itself.

Closely related is the second point concerning the problems of rule:

> What is important to note here is that all three – modernism, Jesuitism and integralism – have meanings that go beyond the narrowly religious definitions: they are 'parties' inside the 'international absolute empire' constituted by the Church of Rome and they cannot avoid posing in religious form problems that are often of a purely worldly nature, problems of 'rule' ['*dominio*'].[47]

'Posing in religious form' is the key to a passage where Gramsci spills forth the reasons for his interest in the Roman Catholics. As the only global organisation, or more directly the first international global empire, one that has a longer history than capitalism, it provides the only long-standing model for the nature of international rule.

So much so that, even with Catholic Action, that distinct political party of the Church, Gramsci can speak of a 'lay Catholic International'.[48] He refers here to the meetings of Roman Catholics from around the world to discuss inter-

---

[46] Gramsci 1995, p. 80; Q20§4(i); see Gramsci 1996, p. 269; Q5§1.
[47] Gramsci 1995, p. 99; Q14§52.
[48] Gramsci 1995, p. 105; Q15§40.

national problems while the League of Nations was in session. Established in France under the auspices of the Union Catholique d'Études Internationales, this 'International Catholic Week' that operated separately from the Vatican contributes 'to the creation of a concrete unity of thought among Catholics the world over'.[49] In the same way that these meetings function in terms of the parliamentary interaction of popular political parties, then so also do the organic struggles for hegemony within the Church which present in religious form purely political questions, with all of their regional variations.[50] And these include the struggles of the parties themselves, the importance of the central government to maintain some sort of control, the necessity to avoid being boxed into a rigid position with no room to move, and, as I will discuss in the section on intellectuals, the political strategies used by the Church to effect its own agenda in secular politics.

Bewilderment? External alliances

But, for all his interest in Catholic Action as the political party of the Roman-Catholic Church, for all the lessons he might learn from internal debates for the exercise of global politics, for all the explicit and unwritten comparisons between Church and communism, Gramsci still finds some almost impassable divides between them. Thus, in the conflict over the allegiance of the masses between Roman Catholicism and communism, particularly the efforts by the Church to overcome the 'apostasy' of the working class through Catholic trade unions, Gramsci summarises the Church's official position on poverty in four points:

1. private property, especially landed private property, is a 'natural right' that may not be violated even by means of heavy taxation, and from this principle stem the political programmes of the Christian-democrat tendencies for the distribution with compensation of the land to the poor peasants, as well as their financial doctrines;

[49] Ibid.
[50] See Gramsci 1995, pp. 104–5; Q6§164.

2. the poor must be content with their lot, since class distinctions and the distribution of wealth are disposed of by God and it would be impious to try and eliminate them;
3. alms-giving is a Christian duty and implies the existence of poverty;
4. the social question is first and foremost moral and religious rather than economic, and must be resolved through Christian charity and through the dictates of morality and the judgement of religion.[51]

Although Gramsci writes that he is summarising the 'most widespread opinions' based on 'the encyclicals and other authorized documents',[52] these four points may be read as a brief commentary on the famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) of Leo XIII, which sought to deal with the situation of workers and provide the basis for Roman-Catholic social doctrine. It boils down to the application of Roman-Catholic teaching to the emergence and effects of capitalism. In itself, the effort to deal with contemporary questions by facing them rather than condemning them was an innovation, but it ended up being quite conservative: society originates with the family, private property is a God-given right and socialism is mistaken for questioning the status of private property. Perhaps the most 'progressive' idea put forward was the notion of the just wage, which should be 'enough to support the wage earner in reasonable and frugal comfort'. Yet, the 'worker' was a male with a family, cared for by a wife who remained in the home.

Thus, the much vaunted and lengthy tradition of so-called Roman-Catholic social thought, as a third way between communism and capitalism that bases itself on theological criteria turns out to be a variation on liberalism itself, and thereby a tool in the anti-socialist agenda. One could read the inviolability of private property as a self-serving agenda for the Church, but it is also a linchpin of liberal social doctrine.

However, one of the enticements of Gramsci's notebooks is that he shifts chairs as he ponders various angles. And there are many gaps, built into the choppiness of the style of the notebooks, into which the reader can enter and engage with him. It will turn out that Gramsci's apparent condemnation of the Roman-Catholic Church's social policy is part of a larger effort to under-

[51] Gramsci 1995, p. 35; Q20§3; see Gramsci 1992, p. 100; Q1§1.
[52] Gramsci 1995, p. 35; Q20§3.

stand the various political allegiances of the Church. In light of the summary I have quoted above, one would expect that the Roman-Catholic Church would side time and again with the liberals against the socialists. Yet, the Church seems to flip from one alliance to the other, apparently uncertain about whom to back. If, on one occasion, its position may be read as a resolutely anti-socialist, at another moment, it turns out to be just as resolutely anti-liberal.

I begin with one extreme, the apparent concord between the Italian Fascist government and the Roman-Catholic Church in Italy. In a discussion of the Concordat, particularly the interpretation relating to education in the primary and secondary schools, Gramsci traces the confluence of church and state to the point at which 'the state as such *professes the Catholic religion*'.[53] No matter that this is the interpretation of the Roman-Catholic Church (the symptomatic 'Catholic religion' hardly needs explication by now); or, rather, it matters a great deal, since the Church seems to be twisting itself into all manner of shapes in order to take the Fascists as favourable to the Church. That the state seems willing is borne out by the text of the Concordat and the Albertine Statute, the royal decree of King Carlo Alberto of Savoy in 1848 (which became the constitution in 1861 until the foundation of the Republic of Italy in 1948), in which the teachings of the Roman-Catholic Church become the 'foundation and crowning piece' of elementary education.[54]

On other occasions, consistent with the coalition with the Fascists, the Pope seems to take socialism as the mortal enemy, except that now he sides with liberal forces in order to forestall socialist gains. On this matter, there is Gramsci's intriguing narrative of the 1904 abandonment of the *non expedit* decree of 1871, in which Roman Catholics were forbidden to partake in national elections. Here, Gramsci paraphrases the account of the Pope's change of mind by the leading liberal politician Gianforte Suardi, who had already forged an alliance between liberals and Roman Catholics in the municipal elections

---

[53] Gramsci 1996, p. 329; Q5§70.

[54] In Q7§89 (Gramsci 1995, pp. 74–5), Gramsci quotes an article by Father Mario Barbera in *Civiltà Cattolica* which muses that the Roman-Catholics misinterpreted the phrase 'foundation and crowning piece' in their favour. Taking the phrase in the obvious sense, rather than the Hegelian one of Giovanni Gentile, Mussolini's minister of education, whose national reform of the educational system in 1923 saw philosophy superseding religion in the move from primary to secondary education, the Roman Catholics were able to assert the need for Roman-Catholic instruction in secondary schools in the Concordat itself of 1929.

in Bergamo. Apart from the picture of a Pius X terrified by the image of a red victory and the subsequent attack on the Church, pestered by the lawyer Bonomi on behalf of Suardi, and apart from his statements, 'Follow the dictates of your conscience' and 'the Pope will say nothing',[55] what interests me here is the way the so-called 'progressive' forces within the Church, those in favour of participation in national elections, were in fact arrayed against the socialists.

Yet, despite the appearance of a natural confluence between Roman Catholics and liberals, it seems as though the Pope required a little more persuading than such an alliance seems to assume. Elsewhere, he speaks of the liberals as those 'irreconcilable enemies'[56] who came together with Roman Catholics in the Belgian revolution against William I of the Netherlands. My quotation of 'irreconcilable enemies' is at the fourth remove from its original location – me quoting Gramsci quoting *Civiltà Cattolica* quoting a certain Ch. Terlinden on William I and the Roman-Catholic Church in Belgium – so the opinion is hardly original to Gramsci. It would seem as though Roman Catholics and bourgeois liberals were hardly the best of friends. Of course not, for was it not the liberals who overthrew the Church's assumed and unquestioned cultural dominance so that Catholic Action became the political party of the Church? But, in certain circumstances, these mortal enemies would join forces in order to deal with another danger: in the Italian elections of 1904, it was the socialists, whereas in Belgium it was the Calvinist oppression of William I, who was keen on neither liberals nor Roman Catholics.

The Roman Catholics will, at certain moments, join with the liberals, but will they form a common front with the socialists? Caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, the Church would, in fact, support such an alliance, notes Gramsci, in cases where Roman-Catholic workers were being violently oppressed by industrialists. Commenting on a full judgement by the Holy Congregation of the Council concerning conflict in the Roubaix-Tourcoing region (under jurisdiction of the Bishop of Lille) in France, he writes that 'it recognizes the right of Catholic workers and trade unions to form a united front even with socialist workers and trade unions on economic questions'

[55] See Gramsci 1996, pp. 27–9, 305; Q3§25; Q5§47.
[56] Gramsci 1995, p. 49; Q7§78.

and that it is 'a sign of *détente* with the radical socialists and the G.<eneral> C.<onfederation> of L.<abor>'.[57]

Gramsci is obviously more interested in the alliance with socialists in France than with the liberals in Italy and Belgium, for it shows that the Roman Catholics are not default anti-socialists. But how to understand the Church's shifting alliances? A rather unambiguous hint comes in Gramsci's discussion of the armed insurrection of Roman Catholics and liberals in the Belgian revolution. In the same paragraph in which he observes this alliance, he notes that armed insurrection is permissible, especially in 'extreme cases of the suppression and limitation of the privileges of the Church and the Vatican'.[58] Calvin would also come to this point, despite the heavy weight of Romans 12: 1 – 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God'.

Rather than seeing the Roman-Catholic Church as essentially anti-liberal or anti-socialist, the key to its shifting alliances lies in the Church's own interests. Thus, Gramsci writes elsewhere, in an effort to understand the jerry-built, *ad hoc* and inconsistent nature of Roman-Catholic social policy:

> In order to have a good understanding of the church in the modern world, one must realise that it is prepared to struggle only to defend its particular corporate freedoms (of church as church, an ecclesiastical organisation); in other words, the privileges that, it proclaims, are the bequest of its own divine essence.[59]

Gramsci is tempted to make a quick dismissal at this point – 'Catholic "social thought"… should be studied and analyzed as an ingredient of an ideological opiate aimed at maintaining certain religious kinds of moods of passive expectation'[60] – but there is also a recognition that the Roman-Catholic Church is not merely anti-socialist, or that its agenda is not always at one with conservative liberalism or even outright reaction. What it does, as one would expect, is act in terms of its own interests, its own wellbeing. And those interests are, curiously, not purely political or even temporal.

---

[57] Gramsci 1992, p. 353; Q2§131.
[58] Gramsci 1995, p. 49; Q7§78.
[59] Gramsci 1996, p. 274; Q5§7.
[60] Ibid.

The prime example of such a looking out for itself is the difference between Pius IX (1846–78) and Leo XIII (1878–1903): the former ensured that most Roman Catholics were increasingly alienated during his long reign from the every day civil and political life of the various emerging nation-states in which they lived, whereas Leo XIII, for all his conservatism, encouraged, for instance, German Roman Catholics to reconcile with Bismarck and end the *Kulturkampf*, as well as French Roman Catholics to come over to the side of the republic and give away their futile hope for a restoration of the Bourbon monarchy.[61] In the cases of both Pius IX and Leo XIII, despite all their apparent differences on the social and political fronts, their ultimate aim was to do what they felt was the best for the Roman-Catholic Church. Precisely what that 'best' entailed was a matter for varying interpretation and practices. It turns out that Leo XIII appears the more progressive of the two, and many Roman-Catholics still consider the reign of Pius IX, responsible for what is perhaps my favourite statement, the *Syllabus Errorum*, a low point in the history of the Roman-Catholic Church. I have been getting to my point in a roundabout fashion: rather than reading Gramsci's observation – that the Roman-Catholic Church's changing political and social policies are always geared towards the interests of the Church – as a criticism of the Church, it turns out to be a recognition of precisely what the Church should be doing. It is, in other words, not inherently reactionary or conservative, even if its decisions, pronouncements and acts often seem to be. In its most basic motivation, the communist party is not going to be, nor should it be, any different. Quite explicitly, the party's self-interest is the working class – for Gramsci, the masses, or *populo* – and the revolution which will overthrow the conditions under which the working class is exploited. In the same way that the Church's social policy seems contradictory and ad hoc, so also will be the political and social strategy of the communist party, unless its prime motivation and 'self-interest' becomes clear. The lesson to be learned is that the party should not act contrary to its own prime objective.

[61] On the latter see Gramsci 1996, pp. 282–3; Q5§18.

Intellectuals

Thus far, I have argued that the underlying motivation of Gramsci's intricate exploration of the arcane byways of Roman-Catholic politics lies in the possible tips he might learn, whether in Catholic Action, internal conflicts or external allegiances. But he is also fascinated by the Protestants, especially the ecumenical movement. I will return to the Protestants and their Reformation in the closing section of this chapter, but, first, his extraordinary considerations of the clergy, the 'caste' intellectuals.

Along with the notion of hegemony, probably the most widely influential category from Gramsci's work has been the organic or democratic intellectual. In part, this was due to the decisions made by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith in the selections for their English translations of Gramsci's notebooks. Boldly put, the organic intellectual is one whose work is integral to the everyday lives and politics of the masses. Lenin is, for Gramsci, the great model, theorising only in the midst of intense practice. But what did not come out in that initial edition by Hoare and Nowell Smith is the importance of Gramsci's reflections on the clergy, along with some lengthy notes on the religious intellectuals of China,[62] Japan[63] and Islam,[64] not only for the idea of the organic intellectual but for a fuller appreciation of Gramsci's notion of the intellectual *per se*.

Let me begin with an observation that inadvertently functions as his thesis regarding intellectuals. In a very specific comment on the United States,[65] he notes: 'it turns out that on certain occasions the clergy of all the churches has functioned as public opinion in the absence of a normal party and a press organ of such a party'.[66]

---

[62] Gramsci 1996, pp. 285–92; Q5§23.
[63] Gramsci 1996, pp. 305–8; Q5§50.
[64] Gramsci 1996, pp. 344–6; Q5§90.
[65] The United States intrigues Gramsci: 'America is an interesting terrain for examining the current state of Catholicism both as a cultural and as a political element' (Gramsci 1996, p. 316; Q5§57).
[66] Gramsci 1992, p. 163; Q1§51. Joseph Buttigieg's extremely useful footnotes fill in some of the gaps in Gramsci's cryptic text. Gramsci refers here to Philip 1927, and Buttigieg suggests that Gramsci comments on various instances in which the churches explicitly commented upon and supported strikes, campaigns for the eight hour day and so on in the 1910s and 20s. These range from individual priests and ministers, the Industrial Committee of the Protestant Churches, the Federal Council of Churches and the Interchurch World Movement. See Gramsci 1992, p. 454.

He wants to read the churches themselves, and not merely Catholic Action, as a type of political party, or rather, as the stand-in for a political party. It is not that the Church is analogous to the party, but that, on occasions, that Church itself becomes a political party in 'the absence of a normal party'. And Gramsci is not speaking of a singular Church, the Roman-Catholic Church that was his focus in the discussion of Catholic Action, but of the various churches and denominations in the United States. What interests him is the way these churches can form various ecumenical bodies – such as the Federal Council of Churches and the Interchurch World Movement – and speak as one voice on specifically political issues. In what follows, I will pick up the main interest of the quotation I have been exegeting, namely, the clergy.

For Gramsci, then, clergy of all types – priest, vicar, minister, pastor and so on – become not merely the intellectuals but the press organ or public opinion of the party that is not quite a party. The clergy have, of course, always been the intellectuals of the various churches, especially the teachers and doctors of the church. Too often, the work of these intellectuals remains in-house, enclosed within the ranks of the churches themselves. Although Gramsci is interested in these intellectuals as well (see below), the ones who draw his attention are those who enable the churches to make statements and act on political questions – strikes, class conflict, government policy and so on. My point here is that it is precisely when the clergy, or at least those committees and individuals within the churches given to political commentary, function as the press organ or public opinion that they come closest to his favoured organic or democratic intellectuals.

I have chosen this example to begin my discussion of clerical intellectuals, since it is both a contemporary one and outside Gramsci's usual domain of reflections on the Roman-Catholic Church in Italy. There is plenty of the latter in most of Gramsci's comments on the Church, but he prefers to look to the historical function of the clergy, especially in the Middle Ages, as precursors to the place and role of intellectuals in the modern world.

However, Gramsci is not one to make lax comparisons, especially on a question such as that of intellectuals. And so he qualifies his observations:

> Is there an organic study of the clergy as a 'class-caste'? It seems to me that it would be indispensable as a beginning and as a condition for the whole study that remains to be done on the function of religion in the historical and intellectual development of humanity. The precise juridical and de facto

> situation of the Church and the clergy in various periods and countries, its economic conditions and functions, its exact relations with the ruling classes and with the state.[67]

The cohortative voice of this quotation runs in a number of directions, especially social or class analysis and history, but I am interested in two aspects of Gramsci's analysis. The first is where he seeks to position the clergy within already existing or given class differentiations; the second takes the clergy as a distinct class, beginning with feudalism and then following through the implications when the social situation of the clergy changes dramatically.

I am going to arrange Gramsci's various comments in a rough chronological order, since it makes better sense of his uses of 'caste' and 'class'. The bottom line is that the clergy becomes a 'caste' in Gramsci's sense when the conditions for their existence as a class have passed, and yet they maintain a residual status. When he goes searching back a little, especially into the Middle Ages, the emphasis is squarely on the clergy as itself a class in the medieval class hierarchy. In order to get to that point, however, he first distinguishes between the Church as a clerical organisation and as an organisation of the faithful.[68] In its latter function, the Church developed a body of political, moral and religious principles that sat in a profound tension with the interests of the Church as a clerical organisation. Gramsci thus reworks the old distinction between the Church's temporal and spiritual realms: if the spiritual is that of religious and moral belief and instruction, then the temporal becomes that realm of that 'class-caste' of the clergy. The distinction he retools then allows him to account for the close links between the clergy and the lower feudal classes, particularly that of the peasants. But only in a dialectical fashion: the support of the lower classes was not a result of the Church's moral-religious principles but of its clerical, economic status. That is, as a distinct feudal class, the clergy sought to preserve its economic interests against the other classes who attempted to reduce its influence; thereby, the Church became a support of the peasants in an alliance against the other classes, insofar as the peasants enabled the Church to maintain and expand its influence. But this alliance was fraught with its own tensions, since the moral and religious principles ran against the economic interests of the Church. After all, points

---

[67] Gramsci 1992, p. 234; Q1§154.
[68] Gramsci 1992, p. 213; Q1§128.

out Gramsci, as a feudal class the clergy exploited the peasants as much as the king and nobles. This internal contradiction between religious and economic interests then realises itself in the French Revolution whose principles 'are precisely the principles of the community of the faithful in opposition to the feudal order of the clergy'.[69] The clergy was thus playing a double game: it championed the peasants over against the other classes in order to enhance its own status, and yet it also maintained an alliance with the king and the nobles in order to keep the peasants in their subordinate position. It is this latter alliance that the moral and religious principles of the community of the faithful, realised in the French Revolution and then the Protestant Reformation, challenged and attempted to break. The fracture between the clergy as a class and the organisation of believers, between the shepherd and the flock, while itself the working out of a deep contradiction, becomes a heresy and schism.[70]

Lest the logic of this internal contradiction be seen as wholly positive – that is, in the French Revolution and the Renaissance – Gramsci also points out that the destruction of Church property by national liberalism, the heir of the Renaissance and the Revolution, has had a detrimental effect. Thus, although the Church exploited the peasants and others, it also provided charity, popular culture, relief services and so on that disappeared with the Church's temporal estates, replaced by 'even more parasitic'[71] forms of ownership. A purely cynical reading would suggest that the Church needed to keep peasants alive in order to exploit them, but that the capitalist relations that followed the Church did not bother. Rather, I would suggest that this is another manifestation of the contradictions Gramsci traces in the medieval Church. What arrives in its place, with all the best intentions of the eradication of the corruption and superstition of the Church, is even worse: pure exploitation with little mitigation.

The implication of Gramsci's analysis of the medieval Church and its legacy is twofold: the French Revolution, which, in its laicisation of the internal tension of the Church, is itself a more mature version of the Reformation, has a certain dialectical logic within the class tensions of the Church. Second, it allows Gramsci to separate the class nature of the Church from its ideological,

---

[69] Ibid.
[70] See also Gramsci 1992, pp. 101–2; Q1§4; SCW: p. 192.
[71] Gramsci 1996, p. 76; Q3§77.

i.e. religious and moral function. What interests him is the nature of the class alliance and not so much the content of the Church's doctrine. For what he seeks is a class section of intellectuals whose thought is not at odds with its own class, but one that both reflects on and guides the practice of the militants of that class in a classic theory-praxis dialectic. The clergy, therefore, provides the model and precursor of the class links – in medieval terms, the alliance between the peasants and clergy – between intellectuals and working class.

I suspect that Gramsci's interest in the clergy as intellectuals under capitalism has a similar motivation: how is it that these intellectuals can maintain such close contact with the people, especially in a situation that is so different in terms of political economics? But by the time we get to capitalism (in the long eleventh entry in Notebook Sixteen), the clergy has moved from being a class to a 'caste' with its own distinct identity. The clergy has, in other words, become a residue of feudal class arrangements, emerging now as a sub-class that is not merely regressive but also pro-active in regard to its constituency.

And the key issue turns out to be education. If I bring in Althusser at this point, we can see that the shift from religion or the Church as the key ideological apparatus to that of education marks the victory of the bourgeoisie. Gramsci specifies the shift to the seismic ruptures in culture and ideology of 1848. Indeed, for Gramsci, the possibility of such a break lies with the internal contradictions of the Church: as the community of the faithful and the clergy as a medieval class that opened up the logic of the Reformation and the Renaissance. In realising the values of the community of the faithful, the Reformation and Renaissance culminate in the revolutions of 1848 and the end of the assumed validity of the Church and the sacred.

Education becomes the battleground, especially the conflict between secular (*laico*, with the sense of both laicised and secular) and religious intellectuals – the former seek to impose their will over a previously dominant but now residual class of intellectuals. How does Gramsci read this vital issue of education in Q4§53? He does so in terms of the struggle between church and state. All of which emerges from a more sustained reflection on the various concordats between the Vatican and nation-states in Europe. A crucial feature of the concordats is the return in a different form of ecclesiastical privilege. In light of the destruction of the clergy's medieval dominance over culture and education – the 'intrinsic ties between its conception of the world and actual

reality'[72] that I discussed earlier – the concordats now recognise and grant on behalf of the state a limited set of privileges, mostly political, that the clergy once took for granted. But I am intrigued by Gramsci's use of 'caste of citizens' to speak of the clergy, or 'caste-intellectuals'.

He distinguishes between the caste-intellectuals and the secular intellectuals. Both are engaged in an 'underhanded and sordid struggle'[73] for dominance, the one attempting to hang on to and recover lost privileges, the other carrying on the programme that ousted the clergy in the first place. The details of Gramsci's intriguing analysis of the 'division of labour' between secular and clergy intellectuals in education remain highly relevant, especially where the establishment of Roman-Catholic universities is still under way. But I am also interested in the working categories of his analysis, especially that of division of labour, for it assumes that intellectuals either form distinct classes or, rather, sub-groups or class fractions, for which he uses the term 'caste'.

So, let us dive into a little more detail and then move onto the categories of analysis. In Italy before the Second World War, the Roman-Catholic Church was left the task of education in primary and secondary schools, while the state took over at the tertiary level in the secular universities. In various nation-states, the story differs in degree, but, in each case, the Roman-Catholic Church has fought for the right to run its own schools. Protestants, of course, followed suit, particularly in a contest for the minds of the young.

In a manner reminiscent of Althusser's class analysis of the various levels of education, Gramsci points out that the university is the place for the ruling class, as well as those selected from other classes who will be absorbed into the mechanisms of rule. Only at the tertiary level can the higher reaches of modern critical thought be taught, rather than the dogmatic education of the primary and secondary schools. For those who attain these first two levels – the petty bourgeoisie and popular classes – a restricted and relatively un-critical education is all that is required. These people, after all, will be better with their hands and bodies rather than their minds, able to put things together and co-ordinate colours in some trade or other rather than think.

Before Gramsci passes on to consider the University of the Sacred Heart, he has made a subtle and unacknowledged shift. He began with the 'caste-

---

[72] Gramsci 1996, p. 221; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 63; Q16§11(ii).
[73] Ibid.

intellectuals' over against the secular intellectuals, but, by the time he gets to the schools and universities, the distinct grouping of the clergy as a caste has quietly slipped out of the door and, as educators and intellectuals, they seem to have become part of the petty bourgeoisie and working class. Not quite: in fact, the caste of the clergy spends most of its energy teaching and training these classes. And, however much their numbers may be drawn from various classes, whether the petty bourgeoisie or working class or residual aristocrats, the process of theological training, removal and setting apart from the community, ordination and obligations – materially and spiritually – to the Church ensures that they enter a curious group that is not quite a part of existing class structures.

The problem, argues Gramsci, is not only the declining number of professions or 'callings' open to the clergy, but also that those who entered the ranks of the clergy were 'intellectually subaltern'.[74] Further, the limitations of the seminaries meant that the education of its candidates was often incomplete and partial, failing to equip them for anything but the lower ranked jobs. Is Gramsci speaking of Italy in the 1920s and 1930s or the current state of the churches in countries throughout the Western world? The situation is all too familiar: cash-strapped theological colleges or seminaries trying to train largely sub-standard and often psychologically troubled candidates for the ministry or priesthood, operating with underpaid teachers, inadequate libraries and woefully short of the necessary technical equipment.

As far as Italy itself was concerned in the first years of the twentieth century, the problems of low pay, the limitations of the subaltern intellectual profession of teaching in primary and secondary schools, as well as the influx of women into teacher training and then teaching itself, led to priests studying at the secular universities, obtaining diplomas that enabled them to apply and get state jobs, first to supplement their stipends and then leaving the Church entirely. Apart from professional limitations and low pay, Gramsci also cites the effect of contact with 'less suffocating and narrow circles than ecclesiastical ones'.[75] The crisis that such a situation generated – the Church 'was about to be defeated automatically'[76] – was also very much the dissolution of the

[74] Gramsci 1996, p. 223; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 65; Q16§11(ii).
[75] Gramsci 1995, p. 66; Q16§11(ii).
[76] Gramsci 1996, p. 223; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 66; Q16§11(ii).

clergy as a distinct caste and its absorption into the relatively newer capitalist class structures. I am reading beyond Gramsci at this point: he puts it in terms of the Church's inability to produce members of the ruling class from within its own ranks without resorting to the old strategy of relying on aristocratic Roman-Catholic families.

In order to remedy this situation, at the heart of which lies the restoration of the clergy as a distinct class fraction with the agenda of the Church in mind, Gramsci cites the importance of the University of the Sacred Heart, the first such institution (I hardly need to add the qualification 'Roman-Catholic'). Despite his call later in this long entry for the limitation of the Church's power and influence and the means it uses to secure its own future, Gramsci cannot help a surreptitious admiration for the Church and its intellectuals. It seems to me, as I have already argued in regard to Catholic Action, that Gramsci's interest in the clergy, that distinct caste of intellectuals that does not quite fit in with the culture and society in which it works, derives from his search for various critical models on which to build the work of the communist party and its intellectuals.

First of a number of Roman-Catholic universities that will follow, the University of the Sacred Heart in Milan was recognised by Mussolini's Fascist government in October 1924 three years after its foundation. The implications, as far as Gramsci is concerned, range far and wide: the Roman-Catholic universities will splinter the secular uniformity of the existing universities; in doing so, they will, dialectically, provide a continuous stream through all levels of schooling in contrast to the discontinuity for students moving to secular universities; above all, what interests Gramsci is the centralised plan and uniformity of purpose that makes the Roman-Catholic universities so formidable.

Rather than the inherently disparate and plural form of secular and liberal culture, especially its educational policy, the 'caste', with its own universities backed by a single-minded Church, will soon outstrip its secular rivals. Various factors come together in the Roman-Catholic universities: 'a concentration of secular-religious culture [*cultura laico-religiosa*], the like of which has not been seen for many decades';[77] the organisational efficiency of the Church

[77] Gramsci 1996, p. 222; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 64; Q16§11(ii).

is far superior to that of secular culture; the Church's homogenous structure that puts all its weight behind the universities.

Although Gramsci would argue that, between the pluralism and relative freedoms of secular culture and the enforced uniformity of the Roman-Catholic Church, he would prefer the former, he cannot but help admire it at the same time. For the supposed 'freedoms' of the secular culture of which he speaks was not much to write to Russia about. If anything, the Fascists in power would become less tolerant than the Church, and so I suspect that what draws Gramsci in is the fact the Church can make political headway against the Fascists without surrendering the prime item on the agenda, namely its own interest and advancement.

Yet, all of this formidable concentration of intellectual activity is not merely for the restoration of the Church, nor even for the preservation of the clergy themselves. Given that the universities are 'schools for the ruling class', the Roman-Catholic universities will become 'the mechanism for selecting the most intelligent and capable individuals from the lower classes to be admitted into the ruling class'.[78] And Gramsci is not thinking merely of the ruling class within the Roman-Catholic Church, still far too much dominated by sons of aristocratic relics. The Church wishes to do far more than produce priests: lay people, thoroughly inculcated with Roman-Catholic culture and deeply loyal to the Church, but also highly sophisticated and intelligent, will become 'more valuable auxiliaries of the Church as university professors and as top managers, etc. rather than as cardinals or bishops'.[79]

Is Gramsci here the ecclesiastical detective, uncovering a vast plot of that curious caste, the clergy? To my mind, he has a far more interesting agenda, although he does criticise the clergy as intellectuals. No subtle conversions are on the horizon for him: for instance, commenting on a 1929 philosophy conference, he suggests that those caste intellectuals intent on restoring neo-scholasticism seem not to notice the effect of refutations of their position, treating scientific truthfulness and honesty as 'a weakness [or naïveté] of their adversaries'.[80]

---

[78] Gramsci 1996, p. 222; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 65; Q16§11(ii).
[79] Gramsci 1995, p. 67; Q16§11(ii); see also Gramsci 1996, p. 224; Q4§53.
[80] Gramsci 1996, p. 224; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 67; Q16§11(ii).

On the other hand, he berates the secular intellectuals, who seem to have given up far too much ground to the caste-intellectuals. By means of the concordats – agreements between two sovereign bodies within the one state concerning its citizens – the secular intellectuals have lost contact with the vital activity and life of the state, becoming detached, realising that they and their struggles are extraneous. Or, as he puts it, the 'abstract polemics of cultural snipers'[81] do not define the ethical nature of a state: that is defined by its legislation. In the situations he has in mind, the effective legislation is of the concordats, one that splits the unitary state into two, leaving a whole group of individuals – Roman Catholics – free to refuse, or at least limit, the desired effect of the laws of the state. It is worth noting that Gramsci speaks of the 'efficacy of those laws'[82] and not the laws themselves, which Roman Catholics are beholden to obey. Gramsci's criticism is here directed at the secular intellectuals, for they have relinquished some hard-won gains. If, as we saw above, 1848 was the crucial date for the abdication of the Church as the assumed cultural dominant, and, if liberalism was the great victor in a long and bitter struggle, then for the liberal intellectuals and educators to acquiesce in the concordats amounts to a massive series of concessions to Roman-Catholic privilege. In the end, Gramsci is hardly more enamoured with the clergy than he is with the secular intellectuals, but what he finds lamentable in light of his over-riding concern for the engaged and connected intellectual is the surrender of precisely this role by the secular intellectuals.

What Gramsci does not want is a situation where the state gives up being 'an active, a permanently active, centre of its own culture' in favour of the Church.[83] In this respect, the secular intellectuals are but one part of a larger problem. Despite his profound opposition to the Fascists, Gramsci does not want to see a return to the overwhelming secular power of the Roman-Catholic Church. Philosophical arguments, theoretical refutations and the like are not sufficient and will not contain the Church and its intellectuals: only the quotidian 'exaltation of human forces throughout the whole of society' will do so.[84]

---

[81] Gramsci 1996, p. 221; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 63; Q16§11(ii).
[82] Ibid.
[83] Gramsci 1995, p. 68; Q16§11(ii).
[84] Gramsci 1996, p. 224; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 68; Q16§11(ii).

Yet he does not write the clergy off in his discussion of intellectuals, searching, despite all his criticisms, for the role of the organic intellectual: the detachment or lack of class fit of this 'caste' of intellectuals; the single-mindedness of the educational programme of the Church, of which the university functions as the missing piece; the 'democracy' of the Church; its distinct politics and ability to have a direct impact on contemporary politics; and, finally, the whole notion of the 'Catholic cell'.

I do not want to pause too long for some of these items. The semi-detachment of the caste or class-fraction of the clergy, no matter how much they may be drawn from existing classes, is, in some respects, analogous to the image of the communist party and its intellectuals. For they too do not fit neatly into the class structure of capitalism, the difference with the clergy being that the communist intellectuals are anticipatory rather than residual, looking forward to a communist society rather than back to a former period of almost unchallenged dominance.

Any notion of the Church's 'democracy' operates in a distinctly paternalistic sense. What interests Gramsci is the fact that

> the son of a peasant or an artisan can become a cardinal and a pope if he is intelligent, capable, and sufficiently pliable to let himself be absorbed by the ecclesiastical structure and to have a feeling for its particular esprit de corps, its spirit of conservation, and its present as well as future interests.[85]

On a number of occasions, he mentions the poor and those outside the ruling classes as precisely those on whom the Church focuses its educational energy. Is this not precisely the class with whom the communists work? For this reason, it seems to me, Gramsci is vitally interested in the way the Church works. And so his observations on the singular interest of the Church for its own well-being have a double edge: on the one hand, I can read a criticism of the closed environment of such a body, but then, on the other, there is an admiration for the united purpose that the Church seems to express. Although the means of achieving such a united programme would be different for the Church (dictates from the top-down rather than lively debate at party congresses), Gramsci also desires such a united front for the communist party.

---

[85] Gramsci 1996, p. 222; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 65; Q16§11(ii).

Alongside these three aspects (the detached nature of the clergy, 'democracy' and the singularity of the Church), Gramsci is most intrigued by the mechanisms of the Church's political engagement and the notion of the Catholic 'cell'. As for the former, the introduction of the Roman-Catholic universities will provide a long process of selection and training – adapted from the one already in place for the priesthood and Church leadership – that runs through the full years of education from primary to tertiary levels. In particular, it brings forth the 'most capable youngsters of the poorer classes'[86] and trains them for ruling-class roles, all the while maintaining their deep loyalty to the Roman-Catholic Church. In other words, alongside the explicit political activity of the Church, through its own 'party', Catholic Action, as well as other political parties, the Church also has a mechanism for infiltrating the ruling echelons themselves, precisely with a new type of intellectual. Not a caste-intellectual in the old sense, one who is part of the clergy and works in this role; rather, a lay intellectual whose deepest affiliation is with the Church and thereby acts in its interest. Is this not the type of intellectual that Gramsci desires for the communist party? One in close connection with the party and the people, busily part of the daily life of politics, cultural, intellectual and economic leadership, rather than the aloof and remote intellectual who keeps 'free' from such mundane pursuits (such as Croce).[87]

Then there is the image of the 'cell'. On at least one occasion, Gramsci uses it to speak of the Roman-Catholic universities within Italian society: 'The new situation in the schools makes it possible to insert into the secular ruling class cells of lay individuals who owe their position solely to the church, and these cells will increasingly reinforce themselves'.[88] I am tempted to call this a Brechtian estrangement effect, for Gramsci is not speaking of the base communities of Latin America and liberation theology, nor of the Roman-Catholic Left in other places such as England in the 1960s. It is, after all, the Vatican of which he speaks, the vortex of a hierarchical men's club of extraordinary tenacity. And yet, the image he presents of the Church's new programme in education, one that runs through from primary to tertiary levels, is of revolutionary cells infiltrating the ruling class. All we need are the Gauloises and

---

[86] Gramsci 1996, p. 223; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 67; Q16§11(ii).

[87] Still alive while Gramsci wrote and one of the most significant idealist philosophers of his own generation, Gramsci both drew heavily from and deeply criticised Croce's positions. See Fontana 1993, and Gramsci 1995, pp. 326–475.

[88] Gramsci 1996, p. 223; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 66; Q16§11(ii).

berets. They may think and talk like the ruling class, with all the skills of government at their disposal, but their allegiance will not be to the secular values of that class. Coming from poor backgrounds and with an ultimate allegiance to the Church, these cells, increasing in strength and number, will seek to undermine the secular basis of government. Again, it seems to me that Gramsci is not merely playing with words here. Rather, it is the methods the Roman-Catholic Church uses that he finds so enticing for possible types of communist party activity and infiltration.

The function of the Roman-Catholic 'cells' closes out a reasonably comprehensive picture of the caste intellectual or clergy, except that, in this case, the intellectual is no longer clergy but lay. All along, I have argued that Gramsci seeks not merely the correspondences with his much-desired organic intellectual, but that, in many respects, the detailed interest in the nature and function of the Church's intellectuals is part of a search for possible models. And the items I have suggested that fill this role are the comprehensive educational and social programme of the Roman-Catholic Church, its focus on the poor masses, the ability to infiltrate the ruling class and its unchanging focus on doing what is best for its own interest. Gramsci will always disagree with nearly every point of the Church's own agenda, but it is the means it uses that he will continue to find useful.

I began this lengthy discussion of the fifty-third paragraph of Notebook Four with the desire to trace the way Gramsci accounts for what was a class, the clergy, in feudalism can no longer function in the same way in the very different situation of capitalism. On the way through, I was also on the lookout for the ramifications of his central notion of the intellectual. But what has happened on the level of class analysis is marked by his preference for the term 'caste' rather than 'class' when he discusses the situation of the clergy in capitalism. What we have is a class relic, a residual element from feudalism that maintains a cohesion one would hardly expect. If anything, the clergy are a class fraction, but even this does not get us very far, since, as Gramsci notes in his famous discussion of the Southern question, those from the North come from the peasants, whereas those in the South are drawn from the old aristocracy.[89] In other words: a fraction of which class? Rather, what is

[89] See Gramsci 1992, pp. 163–4; Q1§52; Gramsci and Hoare 1978, Volume 2, pp. 455–6; Gramsci 1994a, p. 329. If the Northerners tend to be from the peasants themselves or artisans, more closely in touch with and therefore respected by the masses, the

interesting about the clergy is the way such a class relic, a caste, can remain both deeply connected with the people, Gramsci's favoured mass, and yet semi-detached from the current class and economic structures of capitalism. Without recourse to a supernatural or transcendent realm, in other words, Gramsci is intrigued as to how one's own 'caste' may operate at some remove from the current structures, always with an eye on a very different future. Thus, precisely through being a relic, the clergy provide a glimpse of something different, able to look forward in a way that does not merely replicate the present. It is their backwardness, the fact that they are not in touch that enables them to anticipate a different future. That is to say, they act according to an agenda that is, in many respects, their own and not 'of this world'.

Finally, if their residual status as a 'caste' enables the clergy to work as an emergent group, to borrow Raymond Williams's terms, then they do so through education and not through the Church *per se*. Gramsci's focus on education is something Althusser would pursue more fully, namely the wresting of education away from the Church by the bourgeoisie in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. But what the clergy are able to do is work within the context of the educational system in order to carry out their own programme, with distinct political aims in mind. To my mind, it is this that Gramsci admires about the clergy.

Reformation

> Luther and the Reformation stand at the beginning of all modern philosophy and civilization.[90]

Perhaps the greatest surprise of Gramsci's ecclesiastical curiosity is his abiding fascination with the Protestant Reformation. At times, I get the feeling he regrets not being born north of the Alps, that he was not closer to Luther's Saxony or Calvin's wholesale social reconstruction of Geneva. Viscerally, I can grasp the appeal of the lumbering and belligerent German and the incisive

---

Southern clergy have far less going for them. Landowners, usurers, and subject to the passions for women and money, the priests should come, as far as the peasants are concerned, from their own district so that at least there is some recourse to redress (through families, electoral rights and their openly conjugal life with a woman).

[90] Gramsci 1994b, Volume 1, p. 365.

intellect of Calvin, but why should Gramsci, the Sardinian with Roman Catholicism imprinted in his genes, find the Reformers so attractive?

For all his love of the Renaissance in Italy and the rest of Europe, along with its associated developments in French and German philosophy, the problem is that 'these are reforms that touch only the upper classes and often only the intellectuals'.[91] His interest is Italy, and he envies the Northern Europeans the developments subsequent to the Renaissance, their Lutheranism and Calvinism. All that he finds in Italy are half-starts and misdirected efforts, such as those of David Lazzaretti in the middle of the nineteenth century with his 'mixture of religious doctrines from times gone by with a good dose of vaguely socialistic maxims, together with generic references to the moral redemption of man'.[92]

By contrast, the Reformation uplifted the whole of society and transformed it through and through: 'In Italy there has never been an intellectual and moral reform involving the popular masses'.[93] 'Intellectual and moral reform' becomes Gramsci's code for the Protestant Reformation as a model of reform itself, coming to secular maturity with the French Revolution.[94] He draws the phrase directly from Ernst Renan's book of the same name, in which the Protestant Reformation becomes the paradigm for a transformation of French society. But there is a third interchange of terms, this time the breathtaking alignment of the Protestant Reformation, as intellectual and moral reform, with the communist revolution; or, rather, to draw the specific lesson of the last great European mass movement: 'Therefore historical mat.<erialism> will have or may have this function, which is not only totalitarian as a conception of the world but also in that it will permeate all of society down to its deepest roots'.[95]

I am going to track this extraordinary move, running through his persistent refereeing in favour of the Protestants, to ask whether there are not some problems with his proposal. Time and again, Gramsci contrasts Protestants

---

[91] Gramsci 1996, p. 244; Q4§75.

[92] Gramsci 1995, p. 54; Q25§1; see Gramsci 1996, pp. 18–20; Q3§12.

[93] Gramsci 1996, pp. 243–4; Q4§75. So also: 'The Lutheran Reformation and Calvinism created a popular culture, and only in later periods did they create a higher culture; the Italian reformers were sterile in terms of great historical achievements' (Gramsci 1996, p. 142; Q4§3; see also Gramsci 1994b, Volume 1, p. 365).

[94] See Gramsci 1996, p. 213; Q1§128.

[95] Gramsci 1996, p. 244; Q4§75.

and Roman Catholics, and the Roman Catholics do not come off well in the comparison. To be sure, the Protestants do not emerge unscathed, especially in the United States, but his favouring strikes a curious note, especially in light of his desire for a Reformation in Italy. In what follows, I begin with Gramsci's reflections on the deleterious effects of the Counter-Reformation in Italy, the home of the Holy See itself, and then move on to the direct comparisons between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants.

Counter-Reformation and Reformation

Like the infamous list of eighty errors of the modern world in the *Syllabus Errorum* of Pope Pius IX (1864), which listed among other items, Protestantism, pantheism, rationalism, the separation of Church and state, liberalism and socialism, Gramsci piles up his own list of the errors and missteps of the Counter-Reformation. Of all the glimmers and possibilities in Italy itself, the first stirrings of the Renaissance and the passing of feudalism, and, for all the efforts to insist that the so-called Counter-Reformation was not reactionary but one of a series of reforms over the ages,[96] he simply observes: 'The Counter-Reformation stifled intellectual development'.[97]

As for Italy, he identifies two such developments that were to go nowhere: one of Leon Battista Alberti and his nascent bourgeois individual whose prime interest lay in the local commune with little sense of what lay beyond, and the other in Gramsci's preferred Machiavelli for whom the Church became a 'deleterious national problem'.[98] I am tempted to describe these as political developments, but Gramsci's concern, especially with Machiavelli, was to identify the reasons why Italy failed to go through the comparable continental shift that took place further north, reaching through all levels of European society. For Gramsci, the Counter-Reformation has much to answer for.

As for science: in his *Syllabus Errorum*, Piux IX may as well have included modern physics in his list. It is a wonder Galileo did not make it into the *Syllabus*, for he was still the bane of the Vatican, his condemnation lifted only at the close of the twentieth century in a moment of progressive thought. And

[96] Gramsci 1995, p. 24; Q26§11.
[97] Gramsci 1996, p. 338; Q5§85.
[98] Gramsci 1996, p. 338; Q5§85.

Gramsci notes, with a mix of dismay and relish, the continuing tale of Galileo in his own time.

Roberto Bellarmino (1542–1621 CE), the one whom Gramsci, among many others, regards as the cardinal who conducted the 1633 trial against Galileo,[99] was finally canonised on 29 June 1930, and declared Doctor of the Universal Church in 1931, well after Mussolini was in power and Gramsci was in prison.[100] Even if the canonisation was as much due to the victory of the Jesuits in the context of internal ecclesiastical in-fighting,[101] as to Bellarmino's defence of Catholicism against detractors such as James VI of Scotland, later James I of England, along with the obligatory miracle that passes by the Devil's advocate, Gramsci finds the whole Galileo affair a rather sordid example of the way the Counter-Reformation hindered scientific development in Italy. And, if anyone did not submit to the Church's discipline, he was effectively exiled from Italy. By contrast: 'Advance of the sciences in the Protestant countries or where the Church [was] less immediately strong than in Italy'.[102]

And then there is the Index itself, the list of books banned from publication and reading by the Roman-Catholic Church. But the very need for an Index shows up yet another challenge to the supremacy of the Church. In fact, the ban on Galileo's works was, in many respects, the culmination: 'in the condemnation of Galileo the Italian Renaissance came to an end even among the intellectuals'.[103] Despite the resistance of the French to the Index, the printing of uncut works by Italian authors in Germany, France and Holland, the sheer effectiveness of the Index in Italy meant the gradual winding down of the Renaissance in that place. As he is wont to do, Gramsci notes that Machiavelli's complete works appeared for the last time in 1554.

So much for the Counter-Reformation's intellectual asphyxiation. The tracks of Gramsci's comparisons between the Protestants and Roman Catholics run along curious paths, from fetishism through opium and gambling to the central theological category of grace itself, the ideological battlefield of the Reformation.

---

[99] This fascinating tale is far from clear. Bellarmino seems to have interviewed Galileo after the 1616 anti-Copernican decree, but it seems as though he attested in favour of Galileo after the interview, at least if we are to believe Galileo.

[100] See Gramsci 1995, p. 21; Q6§151.

[101] See Gramsci 1995, pp. 102–3; Q7§88.

[102] Gramsci 1995, pp. 20–1; Q6§152.

[103] Gramsci 1995, p. 22; Q17§15.

Let me begin with fetishism. In an effort to come up with a distinctly political definition of fetishism, rather than economic or psychoanalytic ones, Gramsci puts forward somewhat tentatively the suggestion that it derives from the Roman-Catholic Church:

> It is natural for this to occur in the Church since, in Italy at least, the toil of centuries that the Vatican has devoted to annihilating any trace of internal democracy and intervention by the faithful in religious activity has been totally successful and this way of thinking has now become second nature to the believer.[104]

Closer to Marx's fetishism of commodities rather than Freud's notion of sexual fetishism, Gramsci's distinctly political take is to argue that once a political body or collective organism – say state, nation or political party – is regarded by the people as extraneous to their own involvement and activity, then it becomes a fetish, a phantom without any real existence. That is, when the people who are actually members of the group in question think of the group itself as something outside their daily lives, that it somehow exists despite and outside themselves as a distinct entity, much like Marx's commodity, then we have a fetish. And the prime example of this fetishism is the Roman-Catholic Church itself, especially in Italy. God then, at least for Roman Catholics, becomes an extension of the same fetishism, 'an abstraction of the collective organism'.[105]

But what of the Protestants? In contrast to the Roman-Catholic desire for an active consent, an identification of the individual with the whole as it is represented by the rulers, in other words, the complete absence of any internal democracy – in contrast to all of this, the Protestant churches are built on the need for such democracy, such involvement by believers, even if 'any form of intervention from below would splinter the Church'.[106] Anathema to the Roman-Catholic desire for unity, the actual difference of opinion and involvement of all believers in the Protestant churches is vital to their existence.

As we would expect by now, the Protestants do find themselves in a somewhat better position. Even precursors such as the German Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) have a favourable glow about them. A reformer before the

---

[104] Gramsci 1995, p. 15; Q15§13.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Gramsci 1995, p. 16; Q15§13.

Reformation, proposing that the pope be subject to the Church councils, that there be unity in a divided church, an understanding of Islam based on a common scriptural core, and, just to round out the necessary image of the Renaissance man that he was, he also proposed the concept of infinity and became one the foundational figures of modern philosophy. It is not that Gramsci is merely reiterating a given position; rather, his wholesale enthusiasm for Cusa flies in the face of a tendency to deflate the Renaissance Cardinal's contribution (he comments on an issue of *Nuova Antologia* of 1929). And then, of course, there is this: 'It is fair to say that the Lutheran Reformation broke out because Cusa's reform activity failed: that is, because the church was unable to reform itself from within'.[107]

In his perpetual tendency to return to comparisons between Roman Catholics and Protestants, Gramsci is not averse to the occasional theological observation, although with his characteristic twist. He will, at least with some connections that I want to draw across the various notebook entries, move from a discussion of opium and gambling to the question of grace itself. In a curious entry from Notebook Sixteen he muses on the origin of Marx's 'opium of the people'. Picking up on Marx's well-known interest in Balzac, he suggests that the latter's phrase 'opium of the poor' that describes the lottery, makes its way to Marx's characterisation of religion as 'opium of the people'.[108] Not without the mediation of Pascal, who dressed up in respectable form the popular notion of religion as a wager ('if there isn't a God, what does it matter; but if there is, won't it have been useful to have believed').[109] Apart from Gramsci's predilection for such detailed etymological speculation what interests me are the comments towards the end of this entry. After noting the Italian penchant for betting, he writes:

> There is moreover a close connection between the lottery and religion, wins showing who is among the 'elect' or recipients of a particular grace of a Saint or the Madonna. One could make a comparison between the Protestants' activist conception of grace that provided the spirit of capitalist enterprise with its moral form and the passive and 'good-for-nothing' [*lazzaronesca*] conception of grace typical of the Catholic common people. Look at the role

[107] Gramsci 1996, p. 311; Q5§53.
[108] See Gramsci 1995, pp. 55–8; Q16§1.
[109] Ibid.

> Ireland has had in bringing sweepstakes back into the Anglo-Saxon countries and the protests of papers like the *Manchester Guardian* that represent the spirit of the Reformation.[110]

Before he can go into this cryptic reflection too far, he catches himself: are not Saints and the Madonna distinctly Roman-Catholic? Do the Protestants not gamble as well? No, they do not. And it relates, in the end, to their concept of grace, the peculiar paradox that predestination generates. One would expect a Roman-Catholic quietism or 'good-for-nothing' conception of grace to invade the Calvinist consciousness with even more force, but Calvinists do not gamble on God's grace, submitting themselves to a lottery whose result is unknown. They know quite clearly that they are of the elect, and therefore they have the burden of responding to that grace, with frugality, good and hard works and the laicisation of monkish virtues.

It seems to me that Gramsci was on to something that signals the differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics on the question of grace. It is not just that Roman Catholics like to gamble because they are a lower sub-species of homo sapiens, or that they are lazy and cannot but help to throw away their earnings,[111] but that it is congruent with a theology of grace in which the Church holds all the cards and the individual remains uncertain and dependent on the Church for that grace: hence the quietism and near fatalism of such a theology of grace.

Almost despite his caution, Gramsci's etymological foray (I can picture him in a different life as a patient philologist) swings Marx's 'opium of the people' around to become a characterisation of Roman Catholicism. Initially, his argument via Pascal, the wager and gambling uses the instinctual knowledge of Roman Catholicism that is part of his Italian context in order to reflect on religion itself. But then he pulls himself up, the comparison with the Protestants showing how specifically Roman-Catholic all the previous discussion about wagers, lotteries and gambling happens to be.

Gramsci will return to the question of grace, perhaps the key theological issue of the Reformation: 'The history of the doctrine of grace can be inter-

---

[110] Gramsci 1995, p. 58; Q16§1.

[111] This, from the *Melbourne Age* newspaper on March 30, 2003: 'Catholic nuns from a Los Angeles school took donations to the track and won $US200,000 on six straight winners. "Some would call it luck", said Sister Mary. "I call it a blessing"'.

esting for examining how Catholicism and Christianity adapted to different historical epochs and different countries'.[112] Apart from the various currents within the Roman-Catholic Church that I have discussed above, he is drawn to the Calvinist position on grace of which Jansenism then becomes the Roman-Catholic version denounced as a heresy. In fact, like Lefebvre, who, despite himself, could not resist the regional and heretical appeal of the Jansenists, Gramsci finds in Jansen many of the features of a suppressed Reformer, closer to the Calvinists and Protestants more generally, and ethically just a little better than the Jesuits:

> The main objection to Pascal's formulation of the religious problem of the 'wager' is that of 'intellectual honesty' towards oneself. It would appear that the whole conception of the 'wager,' as far as I recall, is closer to Jesuit than to Jansenist ethics, too much of the 'merchant's outlook' etc.[113]

What of Calvinism itself? Without even a nod to Weber, he draws from German and French sources[114] both the paradox of Calvin's doctrine of grace and its simultaneous realisation and dissolution in the United States. Thus, in drawing out the ultimate logic of Luther's 'not by law but by grace', along with 'justification by grace through faith', Calvin argued that human beings can produce no good works by their own means. We are, as the first point of Calvinism would have it, totally depraved through original sin. Therefore, we are thrown entirely before the mercy of God who, in his grace, deigned to send Jesus Christ to save us, or at least some of us (limited atonement). Only through him can we be saved and not through any other means: grace is wholly of God and can in no way be earned.

The paradox of Calvinism is that it leads not to quietism, a resignation before the futility of any human act, awaiting God's grace in his own time. Rather, through the insistence that human beings must respond to God's grace through good works – which are now only the signs of God's grace and not the means of earning grace – Calvinists work the hardest of all. Calvinists therefore become the best capitalists, always willing to put aside religious scruple in order to make a profit, as the Dutch, among others, showed time

---

[112] Gramsci 1992, p. 163; Q1§51.
[113] Gramsci 1995, p. 59; Q16§10.
[114] In particular, the translation of Kurt Kaser's book on the Reformation, Kaser 1927, and Philip 1927.

and again. I must admit that I share Gramsci's fascination with Calvinism, for it may be seen as a major precursor to historical materialism itself, cast in the inescapable language of theology and the sacred in the long twilight of feudalism. I want to suggest that part of Gramsci's interest lies in Calvinism's affinity with Marxism, which may now be read as a retooled Calvinism with a temporally rather than ontologically transcendent reference point.

Gramsci's favoured example is, however, the United States, where the paradox of grace works itself out in full. Except that, as Weber was to argue as well, the religious dimension of Calvinism was but a passing phase. It is dissolved in the culture of capitalism, becoming a 'lay religion'. But, just when it seems as though Calvinism may be the ultimate democratic form of religion through its very dissolution, the internal consistency of its doctrine of grace throws up another paradox: predestination. For Calvin, grace may be irresistible and unlimited, but atonement through the death of Jesus Christ is limited only to the elect. Further, those who are to be saved have been predestined so before the creation of the world. As have the damned. God's grace is, in other words, restricted to the elect, those predestined to salvation.

I have taken a different line here from Gramsci's run into the 'religion of the Rotary club',[115] not merely because I cannot, like him, stand the Rotary Club. While there is a certain logic to the suggestion that predestination renders Calvinism non-democratic, a doctrine for an industrial élite, an elect aristocracy, it neglects the flip side of the doctrine of election, namely that the role of the elect is not to restrict God's grace to itself but to make it available for all, since you never know who is elect and who is not. To be sure, I have never met any Calvinists who assert that they are of the damned, that Calvin is right but that they missed out. But it seems to me that the notion of predestination, the concern with an advance party of the elect who must never tire in their work for the Kingdom of God, also functions as a precursor to the notion and role of the party in Marxism.

Apart from teasing out the paradoxes of Calvinism, why else is Gramsci fascinated? As we saw, the Protestant Reformation is one of the few movements that have mobilised the masses into a fundamentally different social, intellectual, political and economic practice. And this is precisely what he

[115] Gramsci 1992, p. 163; Q1§51.

seeks to do with the communist party in Italy, although in a somewhat different vein. Hence the great interest in Machiavelli.

The Italian Luther

However, in order to get to Machiavelli, I would like to pass through the situation in Italy one more time. And it will turn out that Gramsci's argument concerning the deleterious effect of the Counter-Reformation in Italy is not particularly original. For it echoes the argument of others that Italy's political weaknesses, the instability of its nation-state, was due to the absence of a full-scale Protestant Reformation. And this argument, popular in certain circles in Italy, is itself a specific form of the wider valorisation of the Protestant Reformation that Gramsci traces through the works of Ernst Renan, Sorel and Proudhon himself.[116] Except that the argument was developed first in a France that lay between the Renaissance and the French Revolution. In each case, it turns out that the model for intellectual and moral reform is a Protestant one.

In the end, Gramsci is not going to remain with the image of an Italy suffocating under the thick blanket of Catholic reaction, stagnating in a back-water of Europe. Rather, the Vatican finds itself fighting various rear-guard actions against a whole series of efforts at reform, molecular changes within society and among the faithful that the Vatican resists in desperation. In a characteristic effort to identify as many threads as possible, he identifies the key factors in 'the religious question in Italy':

> the real, effective one, by which intellectual and moral reform movements arise within the mass of the people, both in the passage from orthodox and Jesuitic Catholicism to more liberal religious forms, and as an escape from the confessional camp towards a more modern conception of the world; the differing attitudes of the intellectual groups towards a necessary intellectual and moral reform.[117]

As far as Italy is concerned, reform has taken a path that includes the mix of secular liberalism and liberal Catholicism during the Risorgimento; the mix

[116] See Gramsci 1995, pp. 25–6; Q14§26.
[117] Gramsci 1995, p. 27; Q14§26.

of positivism on the one side and democratic and Masonic anti-clericalism in the period 1870 to 1900; and then modernism and idealist philosophy until the First World War; the political organisation of Catholics until the 1929 Concordat; and finally the working out of the implications of the Concordat itself. At the moment he writes, he sees a confluence of both a new type of anti-clericalism and a much greater interest in religious questions by the laity that itself smacks a little too much of Protestantism.

I have paraphrased Gramsci's discussion here, not merely because it brings out the difference between the Protestant Reformation he takes as a model and the constant reform that was taking place in Italy. The key lies in his statement: 'it is undeniable that many things are changing within Catholicism, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy is alarmed about it, since it is unable to control these molecular transformations'.[118] At the same time, Gramsci seeks more than incremental change. Rather, to bring in a term he does not use himself, he also wants molar transformation, a thoroughgoing and wholesale overturning of the current order – capitalism – that would fundamentally reshape culture, society and economics. And, although he does on one occasion attribute an Italian intellectual reformation to Croce,[119] his preference for an Italian model is Machiavelli.

Although I do not want to consider the whole question of the relationship of Gramsci and Machiavelli (Fontana's useful book has already done that),[120] Gramsci does hold him up as the 'Italian Luther'. While he looked to the Reformation as the last great transformation of all levels of society right through to the masses, his Italian Luther retains one dimension that differs from the Reformation: religion must be subservient to the state of the New Prince.[121] But this means that I will finally need to broach the question of hegemony, that most well-worn of Gramscian categories.

Gramsci is selective in applying Machiavelli's guidelines to what he calls the 'modern Prince', but there are two basic points. The first is the need for a reform of religion or world outlook, for which the modern Prince 'must and cannot but be the preacher and organiser of intellectual and moral reform'.[122]

---

[118] Ibid.
[119] Gramsci and Hoare 1978, p. 460.
[120] Fontana 1993.
[121] Gramsci 1996, p. 378; Q5§127.
[122] Gramsci 1957, p. 139; see Gramsci 1996, pp. 150–1; Q§8.

This reform of religion itself provides the basis for a national-popular collective will whose desire is a better and higher form of civilisation. The prescription for moral and intellectual reform looks for all the world like the agenda of the Protestant Reformation, except that it needs to be read in light of the second point, namely 'formation of a national-popular collective will of which the modern Prince is at the same time the organiser and active working expression'.[123] The Prince's very status as a 'myth-prince' renders him the first sign of this new collective, which turns into its most potent form in the political party, 'that particular party which, at different times and in the different internal relations of the various nations, aims (and is rationally and historically founded for this end) to found a new type of State'.[124] For Gramsci, in the same way that Machiavelli becomes, in the rousing conclusion to *The Prince*, the embodiment of the people to whom he has addressed his tract, a political myth such as this can only realise itself if it becomes the ideology, the drive behind and content of the political programme of the party.

If religion is a crucial feature of intellectual and moral reform as that is to be wielded by the 'modern Prince' in order to bring about social change, then religion is very much part of Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Double-edged, the theory speaks not only of the difficulty of maintaining a dominant ideological position but also of the means for revolutionary transformation. On the first count, the ruling ideas of an age, to gloss Marx, need constantly to be reasserted: ever new ways have to be found to ensure that they hold onto their somewhat tenuous status as ruling ideas. This much is well-known, and forms the recurrent, popular usage of the term: ideas, beliefs and feelings, such as the value of the nation-state, nationalism and patriotism, the value of competition, the inviolability of private property and the individual person (to which the bulk of the judicial system is devoted), the foundational role of the nuclear family in social organisation and reproduction, the generation of self-esteem by selling one's labour-power in work, the right to render anything for sale, and so on, are not so much givens as items of struggle that need to be reasserted time and again. Hegemony, then, is chronically unstable, a primary zone of class conflict, the need to struggle with opposition and dissent.

---

[123] Gramsci 1957, p. 140.

[124] Gramsci 1957, p. 146; see Gramsci 1996, p. 152; Q4§10; Gramsci 1996, p. 382; Q5§127.

The conflictual nature of hegemony will bring Gramsci back to the need for both force and consent in the assertion and maintenance of hegemony. As far as consent itself is concerned, Gramsci refers to an intellectual and moral leadership [*direzione*] that operates primarily through consent and persuasion. Thus a dominant hegemony works by articulating and spreading a specific set of cultural assumptions, beliefs, ways of living and so on that are assumed to be 'normal', accepted by people as the universally valid way of living. Here, intellectuals, the 'organisers' of ideology, culture, philosophy, religion, law and politics are central to the idea and operation of hegemony. Hegemony runs deeply through any social and political formation, for the structures of knowledge and values, the filters through which society acquires form and meaning, are precisely those that are constructed and maintained by the leading class or party. The intellectuals mediate between ruling and subaltern groups and classes, universalising the values of the ruling class through this 'organisation of culture'. Leadership, a continuing concern of Gramsci's along with the intellectual, thus takes place when a particular social class can transform its own ideas into a universally assumed understanding of the world. As Fontana writes, 'Hegemony is thus conceived as the vehicle whereby the dominant social groups establish a system of "permanent consent" that legitimates a prevailing social order by encompassing a complex network of mutually reinforcing and interwoven ideas affirmed and articulated by intellectuals'.[125]

And the purpose is to indicate how such a situation might be transformed into communism: hegemony is both a tool of analysis and of revolution. But this means that the new Prince must brook no rivals, no possibilities of oppositional hegemony in the construction of the new state. Consent must be at one with the use of the force, the two sides of hegemony. Religion thereby forms a crucial component of consent, falling under the rubric of intellectual and moral leadership [*direzione*]. Domination or coercion [*dominio*], especially over against antagonistic groups, is the inescapable obverse. By contrast, those with which the leading group in is alliance and association work together by consent:

[125] Fontana 1993, p. 140.

> The supremacy of a social group is manifested in two ways: as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'. A social group is dominant over those antagonistic groups it wants to 'liquidate' or to subdue even with armed force, and it is leading with respect to those groups that are associated or allied with it.[126]

These two elements of leadership by consent and coercion emerge in Machiavelli's image of the centaur:

> You should know, then, that there are two ways of contending: one by using laws, the other, force. The first is appropriate for men, the second for animals; but because the former is often ineffective, one must have recourse to the latter. Therefore, a ruler must know well how to imitate beasts as well as employing properly human means. This policy was taught to rulers allegorically by ancient writers: they tell us how Achilles and many other ancient rulers were entrusted to Chiron the centaur, to be raised carefully by him. Having a mentor who was half-beast and half-man signifies that a ruler needs to use both natures, and that one without the other is not effective.[127]

Gramsci comments on this passage:

> Another point to be decided and developed is that of the 'double perspective' in political action and state life. There are various levels in which the double perspective can be presented, from the most elementary to the most complex, but they can be reduced theoretically to two fundamental levels, corresponding to the double nature of the Machiavellian Centaur, savage and human, force and consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilization, the individual stage and the universal stage ('Church' and 'State'), agitation and propaganda, tactics and strategy, etc.[128]

---

[126] Gramsci, cited in Fontana 1993, p. 141.

[127] Machiavelli 1988, p. 61.

[128] Gramsci 1957, p. 161. See also: 'Guicciardini's claim that two things are absolutely necessary for the life of a state: arms and religion. This formula of his can be translated into various other, less drastic, formulas: force and consent, coercion and persuasion, state and Church, political society and civil society, politics and morals (Croce's ethico-political history), law [*diritto*] and freedom, order and discipline, or, with an implicit judgement of a libertarian flavour, violence and fraud. In any case, in the political conception of the Renaissance, religion was consent and the Church was civil society, the hegemonic apparatus of the ruling group that did not have an apparatus of its own, in other words did not have a cultural and intellectual organisation of its own,

The ideal figure, the mix of force and consent, is the figure of Moses in the Hebrew Bible, a.k.a. the 'armed prophet'. According to Machiavelli, 'all armed prophets succeed whereas unarmed ones fail'.[129] We are back with the problem of the overwhelmingly religious nature of the Protestant Reformation – 'Church' and 'State' in terms of the quotation above – and the problems that this poses for Gramsci.

I want to suggest that the way the problem enters Gramsci's texts is through his analysis of the church-state concordats that I considered earlier. In the end, he is not particularly impressed by the concordats, for they create a fundamental division within the state, an interference in the sovereignty of the state,[130] or two equal sovereignties within the same state,[131] the one of the spirit and the other temporal. But, in light of his comments on the need for the union of force and consent in the new 'Prince' of the party and especially in the construction of a new state, this will hardly provide a formula for such a construction. His concerns run deeper than the specifics of the Roman-Catholic Church here, for any allegiance to ends, religious or otherwise, other than the new society will cause instability and eventual failure. Or, to put it in the other key term, the hegemony so crucial to the work of the communist party will be undermined and rendered unworkable.

Hence, in the concordats themselves, he sees no redeeming feature. They constitute the 'capitulation of the modern state',[132] the concordat 'fundamentally impairs the autonomous character of the sovereignty of the modern state'[133] by accepting the external sovereignty of the Vatican which the state, through the nature of the concordat itself, recognises as superior. Various examples, drawn from the concordat between the Vatican and the Fascist government of Italy on 11 February 1929, merely illustrate such a capitulation by the state: marriage laws for Roman-Catholics that over-ride those of the state; priests under censure by the Church denied public offices; the removal of the laws that abolished ecclesiastical privilege; and the complete exclusion

---

but felt the universal ecclesiastical organisation to be such. The only reason we can consider ourselves out of the Middle Ages is the fact that religion is openly conceived and analysed as "instrumentum regni"' (Gramsci 1995, p. 17; Q6§87).

[129] Machiavelli 1988, p. 21.

[130] Gramsci 1996, p. 220; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 61; Q16§11ii.

[131] See Gramsci 1996, p. 330; Q5§71.

[132] Gramsci 1996, p. 220; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 61; Q16§11ii.

[133] Gramsci 1996, p. 220; Q4§53; see Gramsci 1995, p. 62; Q16§11ii.

of the state from Church schools, including many primary and secondary schools that function as recruiting grounds for the priesthood and the various orders.[134] Further, he does little to conceal his astonishment at the extent of the Vatican's financial dealings and of the state's continued support, purportedly in recompense for the relinquishment of any claim for restitution of the Papal States, to the tune of 1.75 billion lire.[135]

I have indulged myself in summarising the various objections to the concordats, partly to show how comprehensive the objections are, but mostly to raise a deeper question. Why, for Gramsci, is the state worth fighting for? He is, after all, writing about the concordat between the Fascist government of Italy and the Vatican, mentioning also the one with the Third Reich. For Gramsci, the state and its autonomy are crucial for the political activity of the communist party. Even though the state would eventually wither away under communism, and even though communism was very much an international movement, the state is the vital lever to power, whose autonomy ensures the sovereignty of a communist state in the short term. But Gramsci's defence of the modern state's sovereignty is also a logical outcome of his notions of hegemony, as the union of consent and force, and of his development of Machiavelli for whom the hard-won unity of the new state was not something to be relinquished lightly. All of this is still extremely relevant, for while the regulation school argues for the viability of the state in any contemporary economic and political debate, others such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that the moment of the state, specifically the nation-state under capitalism, has waned in the face of the new permutation of 'Empire'.[136]

Conclusion

Gramsci has handed me a vast and delectable feast. The sweep of his concerns, from the ecumenical movement to Machiavelli, provide a distinct slant on the question of religion itself that is overwhelmingly political. We do not have to scratch too hard to locate the distinctly political agenda in both dimensions of Gramsci's writings that I traced above, namely his ecumenism and the

[134] See Gramsci 1995, p. 71; Q16§14.
[135] Gramsci 1995, pp. 68–70; Q16§11ii; see PN 224–5; Q4§53.
[136] See Boyer 1990, and Hardt and Negri 2000.

perpetual drive not merely to understand how things are now, but particularly what lessons and guidelines the communist party itself may gain from considering the gains and setbacks, the possibilities and limits of that global institution, the Roman-Catholic Church. For, in the end, the communists were competing with the Roman Catholics for the hearts and souls of workers and peasants.[137] If, with Althusser and Lefebvre, the 'catholicity' of their writings appeared in the tendency to universalise, however unwittingly, in a fashion comparable to the Roman-Catholic Church's assumed singular universality, in Gramsci, this catholicity takes on a distinctly ecumenical colour. I did identify certain points where Gramsci also fell into a similar pattern to Althusser and Lefebvre. And I also argued, with Althusser and Lefebvre, that such a universalising catholicity has distinct gains that a totalising approach may provide, running through from the claims of a materialist philosophy to the question of everyday life. However, it also has the disadvantage of projecting the specific nature of one's own religious context, one that permeates the very categories of thought itself, onto a global scene onto which such a template fits poorly. This is where Gramsci's ecumenism provides a way forward, drawing out what is implicit in Lefebvre's predilection for heresies. For, in following paths around the singularity that the Roman-Catholic notion of catholicity assumes in its definition, in sidestepping the process of exclusion that catholicity assumed in the self-definition of the Church of Rome, Gramsci emerges on the other side with a catholicity that is inclusive rather than exclusive, seeking allies rather than heretics.

[137] See Gramsci and Hoare 1978, pp. 141, 316, 396.

Chapter Six

The Apostasy of Terry Eagleton

Eagleton has returned to his Roman-Catholic roots (if he ever left them). Or so the rumour had it at the beginning of the new millennium. It is, of course, consistent with a rediscovered Irishness, a cultural Roman Catholicism that even the most resolutely secular and atheistic of Irish intellectuals cannot excise without the cultural machinery itself puttering to a standstill (although Perry Anderson would point to his own ascetic Protestant Irish tradition in response).[1] A censored version of Eagleton's Irish Roman-Catholic background can be found in the tricky terrain of his memoirs, *The Gatekeeper* (2001), and I will indeed turn to this document later in this chapter. For, like Althusser and Lefebvre, who also wrote autobiographies, and even Gramsci's prison letters, I cannot escape (auto)biography entirely.

Yet my concern is not quite with biography. Apart from a critical engagement with Eagleton's theological texts, I will focus on his argument that what the Left needs is a more sophisticated engagement with some of the arguments that come out of the theological tradition rather than the crude caricatures and swift dismissals so commonly found. Although this engagement has in part the need for analytical

[1] As Anderson in fact did in a discussion at the 'Future of Utopia' conference honouring Fredric Jameson at Duke University, 24–7 April 2003.

depth, for a greater philosophical vocabulary, or a recovery of some element of a Europe maligned for everything from the Enlightenment to colonialism, Eagleton's specific agenda, like that of Bloch and Žižek, is that the Left may indeed learn politically from theology, especially in a time of disarray and fragmentation. Over against the other Catholic Marxists, Eagleton vouches without apology for the sophisticated content of theology and its arguments. And so my concern will be with that content, with the viability or otherwise of Eagleton's theological positions.

For Eagleton theology forms the inclusio of his published work. The would-be theologian of *The New Left Church* (1966), *The Body as Language: Outline of a 'New Left' Theology* (1970), the *'Slant' Manifesto* (1966) and a string of articles in *Slant* itself disappears for more than three decades only to re-emerge after a career as one of the world's leading Left critics in *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2003). These texts are the focus of what follows, tracing continuities and discontinuities, assessing the arguments themselves, and seeking Eagleton's own contribution to my search for a materialist theology. But there are generous dollops of theology in both the *The Gatekeeper* (2002) and *Figures of Dissent* (2003), and these texts will appear frequently below.

Three zones of Eagleton's writings are relevant for my argument. To begin with, for a writer and critic whose style is as well-known as his politics, and for one who constantly comments on the style of others, the issue of style is hardly avoidable. Pugnaciously witty, with an eye for the ludicrous, from the local name of Oscar Wilde's Dublin statue ('Quare on the Square' or 'Fag on the Crag') to I.A. Richards's hair catching on fire from lightning on a mountaineering expedition, making his political points by one punch line after another, at times flippant, Eagleton seems to write with an ease that escapes most of the rest of us. And the volume and range of work – plays, novels, poetry for the pub, a travel book, journalistic book reviews, and, of course, criticism – seems to reflect a writer who has never had a block, who enjoys the act of writing. Yet, those first books on theology, *The New Left Church* and *The Body as Language*, have none of the stylistic flair of his later work. Still recognisably Eagleton, especially the characteristic sliding across a whole range of literature and theoretical material, it is patiently paedagogical, keen to make the point in the clearest possible manner. Is this the sign of a writer who has yet to find a style, or is there something more about the apostate theologian who gave up the faith and found a new style?

Secondly, even though he writes at length on a cluster of theological categories, the crux of Eagleton's theological recovery in the later works is that Christology has a distinct political dynamic that the Left ignores at its own peril. This message, that the lowly and downtrodden will be lifted up, is one that he recycles with minimal alteration from his early theological work. Except that now the audience is the cultural and political Left rather than the Roman-Catholic Church. Although Eagleton wheels out other theological categories – anthropology, harmatology, sacramental theology, ecclesiology and even eschatology – he is a distinctly Christocentric thinker. But he is also a Roman-Catholic thinker, one who does not particularly wish to excise that stamp from his writing. Thus, the Eucharist can be understood only in terms of the doctrine of transubstantiation, asceticism in terms of celibacy, poverty and obedience, ecclesiology automatically includes the priesthood, and the 'Christian Church' is none other than the Roman-Catholic Church. Again, like Althusser and Lefebvre, there is an implicit assumption here that the very specific Roman-Catholic features of theology are those of theology generally.

The third zone of Eagleton's work, and one that marks him out from the others in this book, is his historical location in the Catholic Left of the 1960s and 1970s. In the mix of the sixties, from Vatican Two through the Prague Spring and the Civil Rights movement to May '68, the circle around the journal *Slant* generated a heated and very public controversy within and without the Roman-Catholic Church. Indeed, much of *The Body as Language* first appeared in earlier versions in that journal. At the same time that liberation theology in Latin America and black theology in the United States were emerging, *Slant* was causing its own disturbances in the restricted space of England. But what I find intriguing about the Catholic Left and *Slant* is the depth of Eagleton's involvement *and* his studied and resolute refusal to comment on or recognise that involvement in his later work, especially when many of the same ideas recur.

What, then, of ecclesiology? In going for the engine room of Christianity, for theology itself, rather than the various appurtenances such as its institutional structures, Eagleton appears at first sight to throw off the external trappings for the vital heartbeat of Christianity. Apart from what will become obvious – the specifically Roman-Catholic nature of Eagleton's theological ruminations – one of the assumptions in my analysis of his work is that theology, at least in the way Eagleton deals with it, cannot dispense with its

institutional ties as easily as he might like to think. In fact, it is precisely when he tries to cover his tracks most carefully, especially in relation to his deep involvement in the Catholic Left, that such an implicit ecclesiology peers out from behind Eagleton's texts. And so I will turn in the closing section of this chapter to some easily forgotten writings on ecclesiology buried in the ecstasy of the sixties.

Wit and the encyclopaedia, or the tensions of style

Hardly 'charmless' or 'bloodless', 'drably functional' or given to 'the usual flat-footed style of the cultural left'[2] – Eagleton's less than sympathetic observations on I.A. Richards, Jonathan Dollimore and Gerry Smyth – his style is effortlessly witty, belonging on the street rather than the senior common room or the high table of the English university college. On one level, Eagleton's style fills that most crucial of roles in the Left, namely, polemic against the Right. Indeed, he sees this as one of his main tasks as a 'radical' critic: 'That is what we are in business for'.[3] In part due to the smaller numbers of leftists or radicals (and the frequency of these terms in this chapter reflects his constant political dichotomies), Eagleton seems to have taken to heart Althusser's description of philosophy as class struggle in theory. Except that he would include literary criticism, English, the writing of plays and poetry, and so on. Self-consciously humorous, his wicked licks often have a political barb in them:

> A further benefit of this stance [poststructuralism] is that it is mischievously radical in respect of everyone else's opinions, able to unmask the most solemn declarations as mere dishevelled plays of signs, while utterly conservative in every other way. Since it commits you to affirming nothing, it is as injurious as blank ammunition.[4]

Or is it that wit is a far more effective scourge of one's opponents than merely attempting to bulldoze them in a style that cannot even be called limpid? Or that one can get away with far more through ridicule, that the dig is more

---

[2] Eagleton 2003a, pp. 58, 126 and 51 respectively.
[3] Eagleton 2003a, p. ix.
[4] Eagleton 1996, p. 125.

effective and readable? Or that, as Andrew Milner suggested to me, the move from theology into English literature, a characteristically unserious business, also frees Eagleton's style up from the strictures of theology and indeed the dreaded seriousness of the Left. In many respects, *The Truth About the Irish* or *The Gatekeeper* are exceedingly readable texts, consciously designed as best-sellers. But they are lightweight, something you would write for relaxation. And then there are the plays: 'Saint Oscar' is quite good, but the others less so.[5] The novel, *Scholars and Rebels* (1987) wears on you after a while, with too many in-house allusions and a narrative that thins out even more rapidly than the characters. As for the poetry, when he moves away from the ditties that pepper the plays, it is tolerable at best and often woeful.

This is not to say that Eagleton cannot still write seriously or deeply, as the best essays in the *Figures of Dissent* collection attest, such as those on Lukács or Žižek, or the masterly tragedy book, *Sweet Violence*. But the earlier one goes in Eagleton's corpus – for example, back to the essays collected in *Against the Grain* from 1975 to 1985[6] and the monographs written during this time, such as *Criticism and Ideology*[7]– one notices that they are much more self-consciously serious and convoluted. Or, rather, to put it in chronological perspective, as he continues to write, Eagleton's texts become more relaxed, taking his own writing less seriously. In light of these later texts, the earlier ones threaten to break out every now and then, the moment of humour brought to bear on a pressing theoretical or political point, as in the parody that begins his essay on Fredric Jameson's style.[8]

Yet, in these earlier screeds, I can go for pages and the humour is as rare as sunlight in a rainforest, buried in the political urgency and at times dense theoretical points that Eagleton needs to make. And so, by the time I finally tracked down copies of *The Body as Language* (1970)[9] and *The New Left Church*

---

[5] Eagleton 1997.
[6] Eagleton 1996.
[7] Eagleton 1976.
[8] Eagleton 1986, p. 65.
[9] In my increasingly desperate search for this shortish book, I even inquired of Eagleton himself, only to be told that when he came across copies he burned them. John Milbank has a copy, Ken Surin informed me, but Milbank was a little cagey about letting it out of his grasp. 'It's not very good', he told me when we ran into each other in Toronto. Finally, after futile book searches across the planet and even off it by professionals who stake their lives and livelihoods on finding texts like this, one materialised, mysteriously, in Monash University library. It had not been there

(1966) – strangely absent from the publisher's blurbs of later books that list previous publications – and having read a good deal of the other Eagleton before then, the patient paedagogical style of these very early monographs left me nonplussed and in a state of profound ataraxia. Flat-footed, one might say, certainly plodding and even bloodless and a little charmless.

So, what am I to make of this strange and oddly pious Eagleton? A deathly seriousness pervades these short early texts, and I have been able to detect only a couple of moments of light relief.[10] But I want to suggest that this is not merely the first effort of a young scholar to show that he can actually think and write; rather, it has much more to do with the content, the discipline of theology itself. For talk about God – theo-logos – is not noted for generating uncontrollable laughter or gut-busting mirth. Theology is a serious business and this gravity it shares with Christian liturgy and the Church in general.

For all his desire to bring together Roman Catholicism and Marxism, Eagleton is in *The Body as Language* and *The New Left Church* very much part of the Church, adhering to all its major points of doctrine. And it is with the overt professions of faith, the summoning up of a christian (always lower case) viewpoint, that style merges into content. A few of the more glaring passages:

> The truth that the bread becomes the body of Christ is then the truth that the physical world, progressively transfigured by man under Christ's lordship of creation, can become the language of human encounter without simultaneously intervening between men as a source of alienation and division.[11]

> In the moment of his historical death, Christ projected himself beyond the limits of history into the future: in this sense, as the risen man in heaven, he incarnates the death of history itself. To receive him in the eucharist, therefore, is to grasp the ultimate frontier of human experience – the end of history, one's own personal death – in order to transcend that threshold, within the movement of Christ's *transitus*, into eternal life.[12]

---

in 2000 when I first searched for it, and now, out of print, it appeared in its light blue cover.

[10] Eagleton 1970, pp. 89, 90; Eagleton 1969, p. 16.

[11] Eagleton 1970, pp. 39–40; see also Eagleton 1968c, p. 29.

[12] Eagleton 1970, p. 47; see also Eagleton 1968c, p. 31.

> Since the resurrection, the meaning of human community has been Christ. Whenever two or three are gathered together, in a pub or discussion group or works committee, Christ is the ground of their communication, the living principle of their community. Christ assured us that whenever a genuine act of human communication and thus of community took place he would be involved in it: when we love each other we love him.[13]

However, before I subject the theological content of both the early and late Eagleton to sustained scrutiny, let me return to style for a moment. Whereas the issue of humour brings forth a sharp difference between the serious theological writer and the pugnaciously witty radical critic, there is another feature that runs completely against the break I have traced above.

One element of Eagleton's style that is consistent from even his earliest work, parts of which may be traced back into the mid-sixties in the journal *Slant*, is a perpetual gliding from one reference to another. One has the feeling of pushing against an encyclopaedic weight as almost every paragraph brings yet another comparison, another topic that is roped into the general line of argument. At times, they seem to function more like one discursus after another, generated by the possibility of applying an insight to something else that is on his mind in the process of writing itself. This writerly act can be disconcerting at times, especially when I am interested in the topic itself and not, say, how one might apply it to an aspect of English literature. For instance, in *The New Left Church* he picks up points from William Golding, Ibsen, Arthur Miller, Dostoevsky, Graham Greene, T.S. Eliot and George Eliot, all while discussing the intensity and martyrdom of christian commitment.[14] At other times, when this feature of his style works much better, the bits and pieces come together to broaden and reinforce a point that Eagleton is keen to make as universal as possible. Thus, in the closing chapter of *Sweet Violence*, to which I will return later, he makes a direct move to reinvigorate debates on the Left by means of theology. Here, he sweeps broadly to include the anthropological point about the scapegoat, Horkheimer and Adorno, Albert Camus, the classical Greek *pharmakos*, Antigone, King Lear, Macbeth, Oedipus, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Dostoevsky, Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* or

---

[13] Eagleton 1966a, p. 142.
[14] Eagleton 1966a, p. 209.

The Ambassadors, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Lacan, Benjamin, Kafka and Thomas Mann's hedgehog. I am not sure if I have listed everything in this one chapter alone, but you get the idea all the same.

The concern that emerges here with *Sweet Violence* is not one that we find in the early theological works. The encyclopaedic raiding is similar, the effortless skimming that threatens to avoid depth in the pleasure of writing itself, but in the very style a tension emerges between the specificity of the Christian tradition and a desire to say something a little more global. While he derides the postmodern concern with the detail of anything but one's own tradition, and while all of his references come unapologetically from that tradition (see the sample list above), the effort to provide so many comparisons indicates a desire to overcome the universal claims of Christianity that were so much to the fore in the theological texts. While Christianity has something valuable to say, it is but one feature among many in *Sweet Violence*. It no longer has the singular universality to which he was once committed, and yet the tradition of Western thought is one that the he almost militantly champions.

Straining against each other, these two elements of Eagleton's style – the vast gulf between serious theology and polemical wit over against the piling up of references – will manifest themselves in the content of his writings, especially the theological ones, in so many ways. To put it slightly differently, the possibilities and limits of both his style and the content of his theological writings themselves come out of his own theological tradition.

And that tradition is Roman-Catholic. Thus far, I have used the broader term 'Christianity', and Eagleton has a liking for the term as well, often in the lower case. But his work, like the others in this book, is not merely Christian but Roman-Catholic. The stylistic tension I have laid out above is one that comes from that form of Christianity, with its own history of doctrine and ecclesiology. If at an earlier moment he works consciously within that tradition, making the universal claims endemic to the whole notion of 'catholic' that should by now be utterly familiar, elsewhere, especially in the later writings, the global series of references and the effort to subsume Christianity within that broader series is also very much part of Roman-Catholic thought. It is this that I want to dub the 'catholicity' of Eagleton's writings, which might be described as seeing the hand of God in the most unlikely of places.

Orthodoxy and orthopraxis

I have already slipped into the explicitly theological content, where I want to interrogate the glut of theological material in what is at times referred to as the 'committee' of Terry Eagleton. I begin with the earlier material, winding my way back to the earlier writings from the time of *Slant*. And what emerges from these theological scratchings is a continuous search for the integration of orthodoxy and orthopraxis, particularly through the node of christology.

It is not just that Eagleton is an orthodox thinker, interested in the central features of Christian theology rather than the heterodox currents that so enamoured Ernst Bloch or Henri Lefebvre. He is not averse to orthodoxy itself, although not of a liberal or conservative type: 'being "subjected" to an orthodoxy of humane belief and behaviour is rather preferable to being a heterodox thug. Feminism is not an orthodoxy in Nepal, and more's the pity'.[15] Even here, orthopraxis is never far from the scene. In fact, it has a much longer life in Eagleton's work, persisting when he shed theology with only the barest of seemly haste in the early 1970s. For the need to be conscious of one's acts, the criticism of the ravages of capitalism and the urgent need to do something about it, engage in 'action' as it is so routinely called, is inescapably a question of orthopraxis. Dealing justly, overcoming exploitation, the desire for a society in which the old slogan – from each according to their ability, to each according to their need – is not an impossible economic dream but starts to become reality: all of these come into the realm of orthopraxis.

Indeed, in typical Roman-Catholic fashion, Eagleton's orthopraxis is not difficult to spot. Not even content to argue, like Jameson, that there is a distinct political role for intellectuals in the development of a Marxist culture, Eagleton insists on the limited role of writing, intellectuals and culture in general. In the end, the pressing questions are not the intricacies of literary criticism, or some clever turn of critical theory, but global child slavery, systemic economic exploitation, chronic militarism, the imperialism of the United States and the widespread depredations of capitalism. Things are dreadfully wrong, and rather than throw his hands up in resignation, he insists on the need not only to name what is wrong but also to do our best to overthrow the system that relies on such injustice in order to function.

---

[15] Eagleton 2003a, p. 139.

At least he is no hypocrite, a vice for which he castigates other left critics, having thrown himself into the daily action of the International Socialists and then the Workers' Socialist League in the 1970s and early 1980s.[16] Although the image is incongruously quaint – the Warton Professor of English at Oxford handing out leaflets at a local factory at the pre-dawn shift change or selling a socialist newspaper on the pavement – he is not someone to speak without acting. But he will let others on the Left have it for resigned inertia in the face of what appears to be an unstoppable juggernaut. Thus, for all her sharp criticisms of First-World postcolonial academics, or his central role in the intellectual Left of England and the emergence of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, even luminaries such as Gayatri Spivak and Stuart Hall do not escape criticism. If he hands out to Spivak a devastating criticism of her resignation, her ensconcement within one of the most prestigious institutions in the US, her lack of political activism and her wilfully chaotic and opaque style,[17] then Hall's five decades or so of political activism are limited to media interventions in the context of the middle class – where, despite everything, Eagleton comments that Hall has not lost his warmth and geniality – and hardly anything in the realm of proletarian politics.[18]

In response to those who feel that revolution is impossible now, he cites time and again the mass revolts in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s. Although the result is hardly what any socialist would like – the rapid embrace of brutal forms of capitalism that makes the USA look tame – the possibility, Eagleton insists, may emerge suddenly and without warning, like a thief in the night. If there is an eschatological note to the way I have cast Eagleton, in whose work the word 'revolution' is as common as the curiously British English 'a spot of', then this is largely to his credit. For it seems to me that the Left is poorer for its disavowal of eschatology.

I have already broached the whole domain of his orthodoxy. And, here, there is no secret agenda that I may uncover with some careful detective work, for Eagleton wears his Roman-Catholic credentials on his sleeve: asceticism, celibacy, sacraments and the priesthood, communal activity and helping

---

[16] Eagleton neglects to mention their names and the fact that he was in two organisations rather than the one about which he writes in his memoir. Thanks to Andrew Milner for pointing this out to me.

[17] Eagleton 2003a, pp. 158–67.

[18] Eagleton 2003a, pp. 207–15.

one's neighbour rather than a chronically privatised matter of belief, let alone the overwhelming feel that Christianity is as much about the continuity of an institution – the most enduring of institutions that we know, Eagleton points out – as about individual belief. And these are items from the late Eagleton, who is quite conscious and proud of his Roman-Catholic background. There are other items too, such as forgiveness, humility and justice that are not so recognisably Roman-Catholic on their own, but in the mix of his theological reflections cannot but be so. And then, in the earlier writings, we find that the eucharist involves nothing else than the doctrine of transubstantiation, or that the ministry can only be seen as the priesthood, or that there is a distinct tradition of Roman-Catholic social teaching that diminishes itself by not engaging with Marxism.

If all I want to do is argue that Eagleton is a Roman-Catholic thinker, then there is nothing much to say. But what interests me about his theological work, and by implication his wider work, is how orthodox it is. What can be gained from such an orthodoxy and specificity? And how does it relate to his radical politics?

Asceticism

Let me begin with his defence of asceticism. The criticisms of asceticism – that it is world-denying, dualist, the domain of men in rejection of women and children, that it leads to its own obsessions and excesses (too often of alcohol and young boys), that it smacks of a puritanism of which we are well rid – are so well-worn and reiterated in such a crude fashion that one wonders if anyone knows what the word means any more. For Eagleton, asceticism, in the very traditional Roman-Catholic form of the vows of celibacy, chastity and poverty, is *also* about the criticism of injustice and self-indulgence, explicitly or implicitly. In denying the world as it is, ascetics actually hold out for a better world, the political kingdom rather than the kingdom of heaven, 'concerned with future transformation rather than present self-loathing'.[19] Too often spiritualised, asceticism can become a refusal of the command 'Consume!' within capitalism, the generation of ever-greater needs by an economic system that

[19] Eagleton 2003a, p. 124.

must expand, in both new geographical markets and the generation of new needs and turnovers in already saturated markets, if it is to survive.

In *The Body as Language*, such asceticism becomes the mark of the priest and 'the revolutionary leader in the mountains of Colombia or the jungles of South Vietnam',[20] both of whom take on the eschatological vows of poverty, celibacy and obedience in order, paradoxically, to bring about that which they deny – a world of plenty. More than thirty years later, in the memoir, this reading of the other, political side of asceticism turns the enclosed Carmelite nuns in his home town of Salford into something of an implicit and contradictory political cell: communists and radical separatists despite themselves, they symbolically denounced the systemic oppression and poverty of industrial towns like Salford. Their asceticism and implacable otherworldliness becomes an 'acknowledgement of the wretchedness of human history, which they would no doubt have called the sinfulness of the world, and were thus the reverse of the bright-eyed modernizers'.[21] But how is their asceticism political in any way apart from contradiction and implication? Eagleton suggests that it is by means of their extreme self-abandonment that symbolises the extent and depth of the change required in order to render a just world.

I must confess that I cannot find much in the safety valve of female orders in the Roman-Catholic Church, although Eagleton does his best. Simultaneously recognising and shunting to one side any aspirations for women within the Church, the hierarchy of the Church thereby conveniently absorbs and dissipates, as Gramsci observed, a deep desire for reform. However, I suspect that Eagleton's reappropriation of asceticism is, in part, a reaction to the profound influence and continued discussion of Weber's famous work on the Protestant ethic. In a grudging note, he comments that the only sustained tradition of theological questions within social theory turns on Weber's study.[22] What he wants to introduce in his own way is a much wider consideration of other theological items, which happen to have a distinctly Roman-Catholic odour. But, in his rush to counter the caricature of asceticism as some life-denying and world-defying creed, a refusal of enjoyment and pleasure in one's own life and company of others, he neglects to point out that asceticism generates

---

[20] Eagleton 1970, p. 91.
[21] Eagleton 2001, p. 14.
[22] See Eagleton 2003b, p. xvii.

its own pleasure, more *jouissance* than plain gratification. For the attraction of asceticism is not only the appeal of martyrdom, of anticipating one's death by living in the service of others, in a conscious and somewhat resilient manner, but also of its much deeper pleasure that works only through pain and self-denial.

Evil and the humble virtues

Asceticism, however, does operate with a particular species of dualism in which the world as the domain of evil must be resisted and denied, especially one's own body. Of course, there are other strains within Christian thought that dwell with bodily and sexual pleasure – Eagleton's example is sex itself as a model for the union of Christ and his people.[23] But I want to suggest that the connection between Eagleton's all too cryptic comments – as he slips from one topic to the other – on asceticism and evil lies in the realm of politics and economics, that the world in many respects *is* evil, especially in the socio-economic register of capitalism. Thus, he commends Noberto Bobbio for not being afraid to broach the question of evil itself, 'demanded as it is by the monstrosities of the century through which he lived almost from one end to the other'.[24] Neither the negation or absence of good, as some forms of traditional theology would have it, nor even the instrumental and purposeful purges of a Hitler or Stalin, the quintessence of evil lies in its intrinsic nature. It has no purpose or end apart from itself, is as non-functional as good, God, art, creation or humanity. Eagleton's favoured examples are the Shoah, or Holocaust, and the Devil.[25] Without motive or rational meaning, the Jews, gypsies, gays and others in the final solution were subjected to pointless torture and humiliation, transported at great expense across Europe only to be murdered *en masse*. Similarly, the Devil performs evil for its own sake, an agent of motiveless

[23] Eagleton 2003a, p. 124; Eagleton 1970, p. 29.

[24] Eagleton 2003a, pp. 118–19. I wonder at Eagleton's assertion that Noberto Bobbio is one of the few who dares to use the word 'evil' itself. In fact, the move has become something of a commonplace: I think of the volume *Radical Evil*, edited by Joan Copjec, where Kant's own reflections on evil are revisited from the top of the last century's massive piles of corpses (Copjec (ed.) 1996). Or Lacan's reflections on evil in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan 1992), let alone the move from liberation theology to consider evil and sin in political and structural terms that has influenced so much theology in the West.

[25] Eagleton 2003b, pp. 254–6.

pain and destruction. The central term that Eagleton himself does not seem to want to name is theodicy, the traditional three-way contradiction between God's goodness, justice and omnipotence. And the problem for theodicy is precisely the sort of gratuitous suffering, the absolutely purposeless evil that exists for its own sake. I can agree with Eagleton that the value of a figure like the Devil is that he reminds us of the positive, palpable nature of evil, that it is not merely the absence of God or goodness; or even that, when middle-class values such as thrift, prudence, temperance and sexual repression dominate, the Devil becomes much more enticing and alluring, the 'flipside of suburbia'.[26] But I am not sure that meaningless evil is the end run of any theological consideration of evil itself. Is not the instrumental reason, charted so well by Horkheimer and Adorno, that he so quickly dismisses also inherently evil? And I think here not of the calculated and malicious individual act, say running over your former spouse's cat or sending an anthrax-looking white powder in the mail to a personal enemy. There are a host of blood-soaked examples, such as the depredations of imperialism, both of an older colonial and neocolonial age, or the necessary exploitation by which capitalism itself operates, or the long history of the oppression of and assault on women, let alone the Holocaust which is only the most widely known and commented upon of genocidal and racist acts. Is this not even more sinister than evil for its own sake? The Devil himself, in traditional Christian theology, engages in his campaigns of mayhem and disruption precisely for the sake of world domination. He knows he cannot win, but he will give it a damn good try all the same.

But Eagleton gives this all a curious psychoanalytic turn:

> The demonic are those who sense some frightful non-being at the root of their identity, and who find this sublime chaos embodied in a particular figure, whether Jew, woman, homosexual or foreigner. Exterminating this otherness then becomes the only way of convincing yourself that you exist. Only in the obscene enjoyment of dismembering others can you plug the gap in your own being, warding off the threat of non-being by creating even more of the stuff around you.… The damned cannot relinquish their torment because it is bound up with their *jouissance*, cannot escape the

[26] Eagleton 2003a, p. 21.

> brutal sadism of the Law because this is just what they desire. And this is why they are in despair. But since we all desire the cruelty of the Law, at least if Freud is to be credited, evil of this kind is at once gratifyingly rare and exceedingly commonplace.[27]

Like Irigaray, who argues that Lacan is absolutely correct as far as describing the *status quo* is concerned but fails to articulate any possibility of change, Eagleton has here enlisted psychoanalysis as an astute description of the nature of evil. Elsewhere he comments on the tension in Žižek's work between his political dissent and 'chirpy wit' on the on hand, and the thoroughly pessimistic view of human life that he peddles with unceasing enthusiasm on the other.[28] There is, as I will explore in the next chapter, a contradiction at the heart of Žižek's texts between his dialectical Lacanianism with its ban on utopia and the Leninist programme he vociferously pursues – except that Eagleton does not quite put it this way. Rather, the Lacanian Real, that central category of Žižek's thought, is, for Eagleton, 'a psychoanalytic version of Original Sin',[29] the *felix culpa* or fortunate fall. He can do this via Schelling, on whom Žižek writes at length, for, in Schelling's work, that which allows God to be God is that which is expelled, the foreign body at the core of his being – i.e. Creation – that makes him who he is, and all of his creation too for that matter. In fact, for Eagleton, it is precisely Žižek's anecdotal wit that is the sign and concealment of the obscene vision of humanity, which thereby becomes the excluded item that constitutes Žižek's style in the first place.

Psychoanalysis, then, particularly Lacan's version of it, becomes, for Eagleton, a way of speaking about evil. Thus, the non-being, or gap or otherness – for Lacan the Real and *objet petit a* – that one wishes to exterminate or fill becomes what makes us who we are, that is evil. Which is another way of saying that Eagleton subscribes to a fairly conventional theological anthropology: human nature is, by definition, fallen nature. It is just that Lacan provides another way of describing, alongside Paul who becomes the first psychoanalyst, such a fallen humanity. The Paul Eagleton likes is the one in Romans, where he ponders the paradoxes of the Law.[30] The Law, for Paul, is not what

---

[27] Eagleton 2003a, pp. 119–20; see Eagleton 2003b, pp. 256–8.
[28] Eagleton 2003a, pp. 205–6.
[29] Eagleton 2003a, p. 205.
[30] See Eagleton 2003b, p. 150; Žižek and Badiou will develop this much more fully.

cuts off sin and the desire to sin, what holds us from falling into the morass of sin. Rather, the Law generates the knowledge and desire for sin in the first place (Eagleton quotes Romans 7: 7),[31] which Eagleton then reads in Lacanian terms as the taboo on which the Law is based, the excess that enables the law to be what it is. What he neglects to notice is that, in Paul's argument, this means that the Jews, those who have been recipients of the Law, have a far greater responsibility since they are the ones who know what sin is. But, in this distinctly Calvinist moment (the first thesis of Calvinism is, after all, our total depravity),[32] Eagleton suggests that there is no way out of this mess by our own devices, since we are trapped in the vicious circle of the Law itself: *jouissance* is then the need to transgress the Law, a transgression on which the Law itself is based, in order to savour the punishment that follows. One's ultimate obedience is to transgress; the sadistic Law demands this obedience and yet punishes us for that obedience.[33]

However, if psychoanalysis describes the *status quo*, the state of evil out of which we can in no way extract ourselves, then there is no room for a homeopathic approach. We can work out our own salvation about as much as a bandicoot. The earlier Eagleton is not so sure: 'Fallenness is the history of the linguistic animal, man; and the christian belief is that it cannot be entirely overcome by his own power'.[34] The 'entirely' is the crucial qualifier, generating a Roman-Catholic ambivalence which he would not relinquish – good works will get you part of the way, but you need Christ's help to get you over the hump. In the text from 1970, he argues that human beings can be only partially successful, since the conditions for such fallenness – language as the

---

[31] 'If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'' (Romans 7: 7).

[32] 'And before the infinite, as every good Protestant knows, we are always in the wrong' (Eagleton 2003b, p. 52).

[33] 'The Law is not in the least averse to our delight, so long as it is the pleasure we pluck from allowing its death-dealing force to shatter us erotically to pieces. It is tender for our fulfilment, ordering us to reap morbid gratification from destroying ourselves; and the more guilt this self-odium breeds in us, the more we clamour for the Law to chastise us and so deepen our pleasure. Like all effective authorities, the Law good-heartedly encourages the participation of its subjects. In admirably paternalist spirit, it wishes us to take a hand in the business of torturing ourselves, work all by ourselves, make it appear that our self-undoing is our own doing, so that it may accomplish its ends all the more successfully' (Eagleton 2003b, p. 269).

[34] Eagleton 1970, p. 54.

source of both human community and of the objectification and exploitation of those in that community – block the possibility of completely repairing the fault.

Even the later Eagleton is not quite so happy with the bleak picture psychoanalysis provides. Just when we thought that the Law was a pit of quicksand from which we cannot extract ourselves, Eagleton switches to a developmental model, in which the realm of Law is for the immature, children and the like, from which we then grow up into virtue and ethics. Once we supersede the written law, kicking the ladder away when we have attained maturity, the Law itself is written on our hearts. Basing himself on his favoured letter of Paul to the Romans – the one that will draw in Žižek and Badiou as well – Eagleton calls this the law of love, the move from the rulebook to the 'spontaneous habit of virtue'.[35] But the shift is curious in a couple of counts: the move comes from within the Law, and all we need to do is grow up. Further, we progress from the Law to virtue in the same way that salvation moves from cultic observance to ethics. (The mention of feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and those in prison depends not on Paul, but on the apocalyptic passage of Matthew 25: 35–6.)[36] On both registers – the move from Law to virtue and the internal nature of this move – we are still, in the end, contained within the realm of the Law. This is hardly a law in which we are trapped, from which we cannot extract ourselves except by some external assistance. Theologically, that assistance is covered by the term grace. What has happened, it seems to me, is that Eagleton has slipped from a Protestant to a Roman-Catholic line on this question: William Blake and Lacan have given way to a characteristic Roman-Catholic concern with ethics and the moral life, in which there is a glimmer of potential within each one of us. Ethics will return in full force with Eagleton's christology, as I will argue below.

Now the problems start mounting. On the one hand, goodness is as self-sufficient as evil, and the immediate reason for such an argument is to avoid some notion of recompense for goodness, some reward for virtue. Rather, in

---

[35] Eagleton 2003b, p. 166.

[36] 'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me' (Matthew 25: 35–6). See also Isaiah 58: 7.

'a world as shabby as this, goodness doesn't get you anywhere'.[37] Fair enough, for too often in Roman-Catholic thought, let alone Christian thought more generally, goodness is attractive only if there is some trade-off. On the other hand, his response is dualistic: evil has 'some formidable opponents', namely 'humility, modesty, meekness and other such virtues'[38] to which he adds elsewhere '[v]ision, courage, dedication, loyalty, selflessness and endurance'.[39] Above all, there is love (he might have quoted 1 Corinthians 13 here): not the well-worn lurch of lust and a warm glow for another human being, but an indifferent, unconditional, impersonal and, especially, a public and political law of love that has its benchmark in the love for enemies and strangers.[40] Ordinary virtues, no doubt, hardly a match for the sophistication and massed forces of evil. Yet, implicit in the opposition is a mutually exclusive dualism between good and evil.

The hint of a tension accelerates into a full-throttled contradiction before we know it. Just when we thought good and evil were sealed off from one another, existing for no purpose apart from themselves, Eagleton indulges in a rare moment of dialectics, this time in a discussion of the ambiguities of modernity. In this case, he argues that over against the conservative nostalgia for a fabled golden era, liberal progressivism and postmodern amnesia (the usual three targets), only Marxism 'insists that modernity has been a revolutionary advance in human welfare, and, with equal passion, that it has been one long nightmare of butchery and exploitation'.[41] As he finds in his favoured example of Thomas Mann's *Dr Faustus*,[42] capitalism is full of promise and its denial, the offering of undreamed of opportunities only to whip them away again – from feminism to the anticolonial movement. The only terms appropriate to such a political-economic system are irony, ambivalence and oxymoron. In more specifically theological terms, what we have here is the dialectic of good and evil.

What is going on here? Eagleton risks being caught by a tension of his own making: if good and evil operate purely for their own sakes, without reference

---

[37] Eagleton 2003a, p. 119.
[38] Eagleton 2003a, p. 120.
[39] Eagleton 2003b, p. 74.
[40] See Eagleton 2003b, pp. 166–8.
[41] Eagleton 2003b, p. 241; see also Eagleton 1970, p. 22.
[42] Eagleton 2003b, pp. 246–7, 249–50, 260–1.

to anything beyond them, then how can they be in dialectical opposition? He equivocates, between an opposition between good and evil that is 'positive as well as insidious'[43] and an existence all for themselves, but what he wants to avoid is the theological position, often implicit in the various texts he discusses,[44] that virtue can only arise through vice, that the necessary condition of good is the free run of evil itself: 'If good would not be good without evil, and if God's greatest glory lies in his bringing the former out of the latter, then the two states of being are mutually dependent'.[45] But such a dependence leads to the difficult position that we would never be rid of evil unless we dispensed with goodness as well, and, for Eagleton, this would leave no possibility for a change for the better. Hence the argument for the autotelism of evil and the demonic, as well as of good itself that I have outlined above and to which Eagleton devotes a large slab of text in *Sweet Violence*.[46] Yet, the neat sidestep that avoids the trap of a dialectical and mutual dependence only lands him in another snare. For, if good and evil are intrinsic, sufficient only to themselves – no matter how much ontological depth such a position might provide Marxism's dialectical reading of capitalism – then the possibility of lining up the modest virtues Eagleton espouses against evil falls by the wayside. One way out of this problem is to argue that any opposition to evil must be an accident, entirely outside the autotelism of goodness, done purely for its own sake. In the same way that God's act of Creation is entirely contingent to his nature, entirely unnecessary, that which is good might well not oppose evil, and the fact that it does is not necessary to the nature of goodness. It just happens that it does so. But Eagleton does not make this move, preferring to court a curious dualism.

Another way over which he places a large 'no road' sign is the radical monotheism of certain parts of the Hebrew Bible, such as Isaiah, Ezekiel and Job, in which God is the source of both good and evil. In this case, autotelism is restricted to God alone, but this would lead Eagleton back into an unacceptable situation in which both were dependent on each other. What autotelism gives him with one hand – God's complete autonomy – it takes away with the

[43] Eagleton 2003b, p. 246.
[44] See Eagleton 2003b, pp. 246–7.
[45] Eagleton 2003b, p. 247.
[46] Eagleton 2003b, pp. 253–73.

other, and I suspect he is more interested in good and evil, that is, the question of ethics, than God.

This preference would explain the absence in Eagleton's theological reflections of a central feature of the notion of evil, namely the ontological point that evil is an affront to God. For Eagleton, evil is an entity unto itself, a self-fulfilling and self-serving mode of being that requires no outside purpose or justification. But, as I argued above, there is a tension between the intrinsic nature of evil and a certain dualism, the unavoidable opposition of good and evil. I want to suggest that this tension is a mark of Eagleton's effort to sidestep the notion that evil is a fundamental offence before God, that God's own nature cannot abide evil and therefore constantly works for its eradication. This position, of course, follows a different line from that of radical monotheism, where God is the originator of both good and evil. By contrast, here evil is not part of God's nature, and it must therefore have an external cause, which is either human freewill or the devil himself. The objection that immediately follows – are not human freewill or the Devil ultimately God's creations? – misses the point, for the paradox of freewill is that God wants not automata who will mechanically worship Him (the reason why, it was often said in the West, sporting teams from the old Soviet bloc played so well), but free creatures who want to worship Him. The catch is that they may very well not do so.…

So Eagleton avoids two traditional theological positions in his discussion of evil – either it originates with God or it is an affront to Him – but is there any mileage for a materialist position in the idea of an ontological affront? I have deliberately removed God from the equation, but I have come back, via content that Eagleton chooses (or perhaps dares) not to touch, to the deeper import of his own insistence that the Left must include theological issues in its theoretical debates. And that is the need for an ontological, or rather transcendent depth to the political problems that bedevil the Left.

The absence of sin, or, the politics of forgiveness

Eagleton's delectation with the damned and the demonic, the characterisation of evil as intrinsic act, cannot but evoke the question of sin. And yet, sin is the absent conversation partner in Eagleton's work. I have, perhaps, spoken too soon, for Eagleton does deal with sin, albeit briefly and in a curiously skewed

fashion in some of his early and carefully buried theological musings. The emerging theologian of the 1960s skims by the whole question in but a few pages, a pause before launching into the two long final chapters of *The Body as Language*. Here, he explicates the Fall and original sin in terms of his primary distinction between language as creative and destructive: as the pre-condition for history and world-formation, for relating to other human beings, language is also the means for objectifying and exploiting human beings in order to carry out those projects of shaping the world. Eagleton himself is guilty of an awful sentence here that he would probably disown: 'When man does this – uses others as objects for his private self-advancement – he commits what the christian calls sin and the socialist capitalism'.[47] Apart from recoiling at the crude conjunction, the unnamed term of these pages is reification, curiously excised from an earlier draft in *Slant* that was later revised for *The Body as Language*.[48] The possibilities here are significant, particularly in terms of an intermeshing between reification and the ban on images, and thereby idolatry, that so interested Adorno. For does not idolatry involve sucking the life out of relationships between the living and injecting it into the relations between inanimate objects, between things, commodities? And yet, Eagleton does not pursue such a possibility, stalling any elaboration of harmatology in a materialist sense.

The fate of reification in *The Body of Language* is the fate of sin itself in the later recovery of theology (so, perhaps, I have not spoken too soon after all). Banished and repressed, Eagleton produces a range of substitutes – history, confession and forgiveness – that turn around the absent centre of sin itself. As far as history is concerned, he commends the radical asceticism of the Carmelites of his youth for attributing the evil of the world to its sinfulness: 'they clung to the quaintly outmoded view that there was too much cruelty and aggression in the world for it to be merely accidental, or solvable by piecemeal reform'.[49] And this flaw in the world, the deep rift that sets history on a default skid from disaster to disaster, can only be healed through as radical

---

[47] Eagleton 1970, p. 52. Slightly less crude, although only just, Eagleton also equates alienation and sin like many of his Catholic-left comrades; see Eagleton 1966b, p. 20; Eagleton 1970, p. 40.

[48] Eagleton 1968b, p. 22.

[49] Eagleton 2001, p. 14.

a transformation as the depths of…sin. Except that I have put the word 'sin' into his mouth, since he skips past it on the way to redemption.

All of which brings us to the questions of confession and forgiveness. Never one to miss the chance of taking a swipe at liberals, Eagleton berates Peter Brooks's *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* for his theological myopia regarding the role of the confessional in the Roman-Catholic Church.[50] What we get from Eagleton in response is a brief survey of the theological underpinnings of the confessional, although with the curious rider at its close, 'Nobody is being asked to believe all this'.[51] I want to ask: what parts are we, or more strictly speaking Eagleton himself, asked to believe? A fair bit, it seems to me, given his predilection for reverting to political examples for each theological point he throws in.

The key theological terms clustering around the confessional are forgiveness, guilt, shame, judgement, repentance and sacrament. Inevitably, his argument turns towards christology, which I will explore in more detail below. But, if Eagleton finds that Brooks hardly uses the word 'forgiveness', then the word that Eagleton himself cannot seem to write is 'sin'. Thus, with his first point, that confession in a theological sense is concerned with forgiveness, as opposed to the legal focus on punishment, he neglects to mention that this is, after all, forgiveness from sin. Eagleton is keen to present the insider's view of the confessional, the impersonality and anonymity of which is about as Roman-Catholic as the pope's need to tuck in his shirt with a wooden spoon. Rather than the abject, tormented and angst-ridden process that Foucault would have us believe is the confessional itself, for Eagleton it is as everyday and 'perfunctory an affair as buying a pound of carrots'.[52] The conventional formulae for penance – most commonly a number of 'hail Marys' – is less a sign, for Eagleton, of the flippancy of the confessional as of its success.

There are a number of things going on here, not least of which is to drag the confessional away from its association with guilt and penance, those inescapable features of cultural Roman Catholicism. In fact, apart from the aside that we have much to feel guilt and shame about,[53] Eagleton draws close to that strain of Protestantism in which guilt barely features at all, in which God

---

[50] Brooks 2000.
[51] Eagleton 2003a, p. 141.
[52] Eagleton 2003a, p. 139; see Eagleton 2001, p. 32.
[53] Eagleton 2003a, p. 140.

has already forgiven us before we ask: 'he accepts us just as we are, in all of our squalor and disagreeableness, and there is no point in trying to impress him by embarking on some twelve-step self-improvement programme'.[54] By this time, Eagleton draws on William Blake, one of the few theologians he deems to mention, but Blake is hardly a Roman-Catholic thinker, preferring the fringe, antinomian groups at the edge of the radical Reformation that E.P. Thompson has uncovered in his characteristic fashion.[55] But Eagleton does not push Blake's heretical side, drawing near to the heart of Calvin (if one can imagine Calvin having a heart), for whom God's grace is so overwhelming and undeserved that forgiveness has been granted well before it was asked.

But there is another aspect of his stress on the perfunctoriness of the confessional. I cannot see much point in an obsessive concern with guilt – so much so that Roman Catholics will relate the childhood practice of concocting sins so that they have something to say to the priest – for a life racked with guilt does not get us very far, and there is much to be said of the notion that human beings are *forgiven* sinners, although, for Protestants, no one but God can pronounce such forgiveness. And yet his stress on the everyday ordinariness of the confessional connects with the absence of the term 'sin' at this point, marking a curious privatisation of sin in Eagleton's reflections. The confessional and its focus on forgiveness become unwittingly the concerns of the individual and his or her various misdemeanours. The examples and asides are telling here, from Eagleton's invocation of 'empirical experience' (his own) to the comparison with purchasing a pound of carrots.

Eagleton will extract himself from such a privatised realm, but this is where his preferred theoretical partner for speaking about evil and sin – psychoanalysis with a more surreptitious dosage of Marxism thrown in – is no mere accident. And it is Lacanian psychoanalysis rather than someone like Marcuse, whose day is perhaps yet to come. Now, while there are all sorts of possibilities for social and political analysis via Lacan – Irigaray and Žižek are the most notable examples – the way Eagleton uses Lacan is inevitably tied to the starting point, namely the psyche of the privatised individual. There is nothing new in my observation, and it is widely known particularly among Marxists who engage with Lacan, and yet Eagleton is still caught in the Lacanian snare.

---

[54] Eagleton 2003a, p. 140; see Eagleton 2001, p. 122.
[55] Thompson 1993.

In order to get him out, I will need to rearrange his own emphases and enlist the help of some Latin Americans.

In particular I think of the liberation theologians, whose work has influenced so much theology in the West and who rework and recover an element of sin virtually lost, namely the structural nature of sin. Reacting to a chronic privatisation of sin and evil, in terms of both the individual and sex, liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, Juan Luis Segundo, and Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, emphasised that evil and sin must be understood in terms of social, political and economic structures, that a transnational company, political party or nation-state could be sin.[56] I write 'sin' and not 'sinful', for the latter conjures up an entity known as sin of which we then partake. Political and economic structures may be sin themselves, rather than partaking of sin, for the latter slips all too easily into the image of an evil leader or two using neutral structures for their sinful ends. In this way, liberation theologians could make use of Marx's analysis of capitalism, the long stretches of *Capital* that detailed the exploitation of English factories and the enclosures, as descriptions of sin itself.

If we take up the material or structural nature of sin, one can hardly imagine a CEO of a transnational company heading for the confessional in order to seek forgiveness for exploiting Third-World labourers, for the destruction of vast reaches of forest or polluting of rivers and the oceans, for the drive to make a profit at the expense of people's well-being and health, for perpetrating the notion that everything is getting better when if we look around us it is hard to see exactly how. This is where Eagleton's example of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission is telling. Here, two other terms appear, repentance and redemption, which Eagleton defends with what has become a characteristic liking for that which has been discarded and is now out of favour:

> An acceptance of one's frailty and failure is the only sure basis for any more enduring achievement, as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission . . . might suggest. They are not busy simply consoling, therapising and disciplining themselves down there in Pretoria.[57]

---

[56] Gutiérrez 1969, Gutiérrez 1983, Segundo 1976, Boff and Boff 1987.
[57] Eagleton 2003a, p. 141.

Hardly the personal affair of the confessional, nor the individual slips and petty sins which Eagleton was so keen to identify as unthinking and mechanical only a couple of pages earlier. In full public view (Eagleton's essay was first published in 2000), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission sought to short-circuit the inveterate tendency for revenge that the post-apartheid era in South Africa readily leant itself to. But my point is that, in this example, Eagleton unwittingly wrenches his discussion of confession, forgiveness and repentance out of the private realm of personal devotion and religious commitment and into the space of political, economic and social sin. This is how I am going to read his comments in *Sweet Violence*:

> Forgiveness is both lavish, since a form of generosity, but also a kind of negation, refusing to return like for like, plucking something from nothing. As such, it is a utopian gesture which stands for a moment outside the rules of the game. A refusal to retaliate goes along with what seems its opposite, the extravagance of giving more than is actually demanded, offering your cloak as well as your coat or walking two miles rather than one.[58]

But it is also how I want to read his comments on repentance, *metanoia* and even christology. Except that he still will not write the word 'sin': from what, I want to ask, does one repent? From what does one undergo the radical transformation of *metanoia*, usually translated as 'conversion'?

Confession comes to stand in for sin in Eagleton's text: confession, he states, is the signifier of repentance and *metanoia*, and, more astoundingly, redemption depends upon confession. On the first, I can agree in part, but not the second. Yet, on this first point – confession as a signifier of repentance – the Roman-Catholic Eagleton takes over, a relic of his earlier incarnation in which the sacraments were crucial. Thus, he argues not only that confession is a sacrament (the theological term for signifier), but also that one cannot approach the altar in the communal mass without reconciling oneself to one's neighbour. Here, the theologian of the 1960s throws off his covers, for the sacrament is still the signifier of an un-alienated and reconciled life. As he wrote in 1970: 'The promise of the sacramental life is that these contradictions will be finally surpassed, in the fully human society of heaven'.[59] In fact, the curious turn to

---

[58] Eagleton 2003b, p. 140; see Eagleton 1966a, p. 22.
[59] Eagleton 1970, p. 12.

the sacraments makes much more sense in light of this earlier Eagleton. For, as I will elaborate below, a characteristic feature of his early theological reflections is the leitmotif of the sacraments, especially the eucharist.[60] Eagleton's passion for the eucharist in its full Roman-Catholic form is almost completely muted by now, but glimpses like these, the argument for the value of the sacrament of confession, appear every now and then. He probably would not hold quite to this view now, politicising the promise of heaven so far that it becomes a purely temporal affair. But, even at this level, confession is a signifier/sacrament of such an un-alienated society.

But the second point – redemption relies on confession – is one that even the crassest of Roman-Catholic theologians would hardly want to affirm. This would make redemption and reconciliation depend upon one's act of confessing sin, which gives primacy to human agency. Rather, confession is a necessary part of the process, but redemption itself depends on grace and not on correct observance of the necessary steps, as Eagleton himself says elsewhere. Indeed, he invokes William Blake to dismiss the notion of God as an avenging judge, one who dispenses redemption only as a reward for the appeasing acts of human beings, salvation being a reward for good behaviour. The better name for this character is 'Satan', the accuser of the book of Job.[61] However, if we are already forgiven – and I still have in mind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – and if God accepts us we are, 'something of a worm',[62] then confession can hardly be a prerequisite.

The ready objection to such a point is that forgiveness would seem to let the perpetrators of the worst crimes, from genocide to economic exploitation, off the hook. If they know that they are always forgiven, if not by God then at least by their neighbours, then what is to stop them from doing the same thing again? Should they not be justly punished? Eagleton's response is the properly theological one that 'mercy must not become a form of blithe indifference; it must pay for its lavishness by reckoning the cost and feeling the pain of the injury it has endured'.[63] There is, if I may extend his comments, a close connection between the one who forgives and the one forgiven. Invariably,

[60] See Eagleton 1966a, pp. 69–84.
[61] See also Eagleton 2001, p. 122; Eagleton 2003b, p. 210.
[62] Eagleton 2003a, p. 141.
[63] Eagleton 2003a, p. 142.

they are one and the same person, and the theological reason for granting forgiveness is that we are ourselves forgiven. *Metanoia* is, after all, about a radical transformation in which one repents from sin never to do it again, and seeks to make recompense as a response to that forgiveness. It may seem myopically utopian, in light of the human propensity for sin, but it seems to me that such a fully-fledged notion of forgiveness must be a prerequisite for any workable human society, no matter how utopian it must seem. How else should we read his comment that 'to be accepted back into a community one has offended may be more than some darkly incorporative device'?[64] And such a radical notion of forgiveness short-circuits the pattern whereby the victimised become those who victimise others, justifying their switch in roles by the narrative of past suffering.

Radical christology

With my theological radar switched on, what astounds me in reading Eagleton is the way nearly all of his theological reflections wind towards christology. And this direction arouses within me a whole series of deep suspicions that Eagleton will need to answer. In terms of the traditional categories of theology, he has little to say apart from the occasional comment about the doctrine of creation[65] or of eschatology – the great themes of his much admired Walter Benjamin. As for the topics he does consider, harmatology and the doctrine of evil loom large in the later works, but only because they may be seen as subsets of christology itself.

When you have read Eagleton's theological material long enough, the arrival of Christ on the scene is hardly the surprise the New Testament would have us believe it should be. No matter where he begins, the end run is christology. So, for instance, in his discussion of the asceticism of his beloved Carmelites: from asceticism, through the implicit and symbolic politics of the nuns and the sinfulness of history, he ends up with Christ.

---

[64] Eagleton 2003a, p. 140.

[65] 'To say of the world that it is "created" is for classical theology to say that it is pointless. Like God, and like humanity, it exists purely for its own delight. God created the world just for the hell of it, as a quick look around will doubtless confirm. Creation is a scandal to the sharp-faced stockbrokers for whom everything must have a point' (Eagleton 2003a, p. 182; see Eagleton 2003b, p. 128).

> The Christian gospel invites us to contemplate the reality of human history in the broken body of an executed political criminal. The message this body proclaims, as the theologian Herbert McCabe puts it, is uncompromising: if you don't love you're dead, and if you do love you'll be killed. Here, then, is the pie in the sky, the opium of the people, the sentimental twaddle of salvation.[66]

The only irony in this passage is in the last sentence. If you think this is superstitious or delusional nonsense, Eagleton goes on to argue, then it is nothing compared with those who think the future will be an enhanced capitalist present, having finally solved the world's problems. But what interests me is the 'opium of the people' phrase thrown in the midst of pie in the sky and sentimental twaddle. Given its bedfellows, I suspect Eagleton is here not picking up the ambiguity of the famous Marxian phrase – the cry of the oppressed and so forth – but, rather, swiping the Left's disparagement and dismissal of Christianity without considering its revolutionary potential. He is not alone here, as Ernst Bloch, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek would no doubt point out.

Or, a discussion of pain and bodily suffering brings him around yet again to Jesus Christ. Not so far from asceticism, or indeed his favoured topics of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, pain is one of those things that the common sense Eagleton suggests is a brute fact for which there is no meaning, no matter how hard we might try. And Eagleton is not going to buy the argument for the redemptive function of pain, suffering and illness.[67] Apart from the fact that much suffering has no redemptive qualities whatsoever, he matter-of-factly points out that it would be much more desirable if suffering itself did not happen, if the qualities of dignity, courage and endurance might emerge in a less stressful situation. Over against moral heroes who triumph through pain, he would rather have no cause for such heroism in the first place.

It is hard to see how a christological point can be made from this, since is not the whole point of Christ's death and resurrection the overcoming of undeserved suffering and death? But, as Eagleton suggests, it would have

---

[66] Eagleton 2001, pp. 16–17.

[67] 'One has a grotesque vision of pious believers rejoicing in their coronaries and cancers, locked in hand-to-hand combat with saints struggling fervently to cure them' (Eagleton 2003b, p. 36).

been better had the world not been riddled with the pain and suffering that even the Devil would have had a hard dreaming up.

> Although Jesus is very often to be found curing the sick, he at no point exhorts them to be reconciled to their suffering. On the contrary, he seems to regard such sickness as an evil, depriving its victims of an abundance of life and cutting them off damagingly from community with others. He would no doubt have shared the mythological opinion of his age that suffering could be the work of evil spirits. There is no sanitizing pretence that such disabilities constitute a 'challenge', an 'opportunity' or an enriching difference. On the contrary, they are rightly seen as a curse, and Jesus's battle against them is presented as an integral part of his redemptive mission, not as some mere outward sign of an inward healing.[68]

Here, as elsewhere, Eagleton is a little too hasty to attribute what is said in the New Testament about Jesus to the man himself. The well-known problem in New-Testament studies is that it is well nigh impossible to say anything about the historical Jesus apart from the fact that he was alive for a while. Better, then, to say that one is opting for a particular aspect of the representation of Jesus Christ, except that the down-to-earth Eagleton would rather have some historical figure on which to fix his particular brand of christology. And so, he speculates as so many before him on Jesus's self-knowledge, disappointment, his willing submission to death, and generally how he felt and thought.[69] There is not much to be gained from such speculation, unless one wants to enlist this redeemer figure in one's own brigades, to justify a particular representation of Jesus as one that he would endorse himself.

Thirdly, hard by pain and suffering is the question of martyrdom. Over against the individuality of suicide, Eagleton stresses the collective side of martyrdom. If the suicide relinquishes what is worthless, the martyr offers up what is most precious – his or her own life.[70] It is the most radical expression of the intensity, the all-or-nothing dimension of the Christian life.[71] Eagleton invokes Paul, although without explicit reference to any New-Testament texts, to make a moral point concerning the way we should live our lives:

---

[68] Eagleton 2003b, pp. 34–5; see Eagleton 2001, p. 113.
[69] See especially Eagleton 2003b, p. 35.
[70] See Eagleton 2003b, p. 35.
[71] Eagleton 1966a, pp. 6–11.

> It is the martyr's meaning of death-in-life which St Paul has in mind when he comments that we die every moment.... True self-abnegation is not a matter of political submissiveness or the heady *jouissance* of sexual pleasure, but of anticipating one's death by living in the service of others'.[72]

The martyr, then, is the ultimate moral exemplar, although Eagleton neglects to mention that Paul himself urged his readers to imitate his own life; only by living as though one were already dead, that is, in denying the primacy of one's self, is a life fully in service to others possible. In this respect, it is less a purely individual act, but 'a socializing of one's own death'.[73]

Again, the political point is not difficult to spot: over against the liberal creed of the sacrosanct private individual, the collectivising of individual life in martyrdom, of offering up one's own life in the hope that something good may come of it, has a distinctly socialist feel to it. The revolutionary who gives her life for the end of oppression and a more just society is not far beneath this picture. A little further down, but not too far, is the figure of Jesus Christ himself, whom Eagleton has no qualms in taking as a revolutionary.

> Jesus plainly does not welcome his own impending torture and death, even though he seems impelled by an obscure conviction that such failure will prove the only way in which his mission will succeed. In the carefully staged Gethsemane scene, however, he is clearly presented as panicking, terror-stricken at the thought of what he must undergo and urgently pressing his Father to spare him such torment. He does not sound like a man for whom resurrection is just around the corner. One must be prepared to lay down one's life for others, while praying devoutly that one is never called upon to do anything so thoroughly disagreeable.[74]

Eagleton is relying more on the narratives of the three synoptic gospels rather than that of John, where Jesus seems in complete control, even in the process of his own death. Rather than take the myth of Jesus's death and resurrection as the source of redemption, although he does use it as a political model, Eagleton's christology here begins to show its true colours. Asceticism, the overcoming of pain, and then martyrdom all invoke the figure of Jesus Christ

---

[72] Eagleton 2003a, p. 125; see Eagleton 2003b, p. 36.
[73] Eagleton 2003a, p. 124.
[74] Eagleton 2003b, p. 35; see Eagleton 2001, pp. 113–14.

as exemplar, as one to follow and imitate in your own life. I will have more to say on this type of christology below, save to mention here that with a venerable tradition of its own, the notion of *imitatio Christi* operates on the model of leader and disciple.

But I have run on too quickly in my discussion of martyrdom, carried away a little by the importance of the moral exemplar in Eagleton's work. If we take a few steps back, then martyrdom turns out to assume the key notion of self-sacrifice, which, in the final chapter of *Sweet Violence*, becomes the crucial political question that emerges from the issue of tragedy. And tragedy too will find its inevitable focus in christology. In a wholesale effort to wrest the argument that tragedy has much to do with religion away from conservative scholars, Eagleton argues not only that sacrifice is a central category for tragedy, but also that the Left should be very much interested in it. And if this does not hold up in the face of suspicions from the Left (the problem being the apparent valorisation of myth and nature over against history and reason), then his recovery of christology as a linchpin of sacrifice will make more than a few splutter over their drinks.

Sacrifice or self-sacrifice? I have used the two interchangeably thus far, but Eagleton makes it clear at the beginning of his discussion that he is interested in the transformation of sacrifice, as a mode of appeasing the capricious gods and bargaining for their favour, into self-sacrifice in the person of Jesus Christ. I will return to this problem below, but once he has done this he can align a whole series of (self-)sacrificial figures under this banner: the ancient Greek *pharmakos*, the most deformed and dejected members (for there were two *pharmakoi*) of the community who were ritually degraded and spurned, struck on the genitals while being paraded down the streets, before being sent out of the city-state; the embodiment of such a figure in Oedipus, who rids Colonus of its curse by embodying the curse itself; King Lear, of whom he writes that the only fate that did not befall him was to be eaten; Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick*, embodying the outcast whalers upon whom early capitalist society depended heavily; the polluted yet redemptive figure of Hester Prynne (the only woman in this collection) of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*; and so on. All of them are scapegoats, *pharmakoi*, Christ figures.

But let me return to Christ, at least in my discussion. For Eagleton, the political point of Jesus's death and resurrection is twofold: he is the self-sacrificial model *par excellence*, but he shares the status as scapegoat with a whole list of

other tragic victims. Eagleton cannot emphasise enough the sheer dereliction and simultaneously redemptive necessity of such a scapegoat, playing on the ambiguity of the 'sacred', that which is both reviled and holy, untouchable yet revered. The catch, however, is that the moment Christ's crucifixion is seen as the prerequisite for his resurrection, when suffering is 'the way-station or essential passage to victory, rather as dental surgery is an unpleasant but unavoidable step to towards oral health',[75] then it can no longer be redemptive. Crucial to Eagleton's understanding of tragedy, this Adornoesque dialectical move – pushing an item or term to its limit so that it yields its dialectical other – will also become important in my criticism of Eagleton's christocentric theology. No human sorcerer this, no conjuring trick, and Eagleton pulls out a string of signals of Christ's failure on the cross: the 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' (Mark 15: 34; Matthew 27: 46) quoted by the Jesus of Matthew and Mark from Psalm 22 (although Eagleton as usual neglects to make the direct references); the failed expectation that he would return before his followers were dead; the descent into hell of the Apostles' Creed; Paul's notion that Jesus was 'made sin' that evokes the pattern of the scapegoat. 'Cul-de-sac', 'miserable failure', 'accepting the worst', 'forlorn faith', 'bereftness', 'the last bitter drop', 'destitute', 'the hell of meaninglessness and desolation', 'monstrous', 'outcast' – all of these terms pepper the discussion of Jesus's tragic death.[76] But Eagleton is after the political point, which turns out to be the need for going beyond the most wretched and hopeless condition in which human beings can find themselves before any political redemption is possible.

Christ is, then, the tragic scapegoat, the sinless one who takes on the sins of the community and is expelled in fear and loathing in order to avoid catastrophe. Rather than focus on the community restored, for Eagleton tragedy lies with the scapegoat, wandering beyond humanity in some border zone of loathing, meaninglessness and unresolved trauma: 'In Christian terms, this is Christ's descent into hell after his scapegoating on the cross, the solidarity with human despair and destitution by which he "becomes sin" for our sake'.[77] But, in a deft theological turn, the immunised community becomes the arena

[75] Eagleton 2003b, p. 36.
[76] Eagleton 2003b, p. 37.
[77] Eagleton 2001, p. 114; see Eagleton 2003b, p. 283.

of liberals and conservatives, where the monsters are either the result of not having quite enough to get by or those outside the community boundaries. The wilderness itself, the wild and hideous territory into which no self-respecting liberal or conservative would go, is where the radicals dwell – 'for the radical, the real monsters are ourselves'.[78] But this is where all the scapegoats seem to end up as well: Christ, Oedipus, Lear, in fact the vast majority of the current world population, 'whole sweated, uprooted populations',[79] are there, and so should the radicals be. They are, in a move that comes straight out of *The Body as Language*, the *anawim*, 'the dispossessed or shit of the earth who have no stake in the present set-up, and who thus symbolize the possibility of new life in their very dissolution'.[80]

It seems to me that this is the key to Eagleton's christology, and so I want to stay with it for a while. Boldly put, the political model of Jesus Christ is the thoroughgoing transformation of the lowly and rejected into a world without pain, suffering and oppression. Christ's crucifixion and resurrection become the leitmotif for such a transformation, which, in Marxist circles, has become known as revolution. A distinctly Hegelian Marx, it would seem, has turned up at the foot of the cross, for Eagleton stresses the connections between Christianity and Marxism at this point. While both are concerned with the life of common people, the transformation envisaged is not a restoration of the status quo, but something qualitatively different. Both point out that things are much worse than they seem, class society on the one side and a world riddled with sin and evil on the other; yet both hold to a much stronger hope that the world can be a whole lot better, that human beings have more potential than anyone – Eagleton's list swings by liberal idealism, pragmatists, conservatives, reformists and postmodernists[81] – gives them credit. Or, even more strongly, what the New Testament draws from the Hebrew Bible in describing Christ, as the stumbling block or *skandalon* that has become the corner-stone, the early Marx, suggests Eagleton, attributes to the class yet to be formed, the class which dissolves all classes in the process of redressing wrong in general.[82]

---

[78] Eagleton 2001, p. 114.
[79] Eagleton 2003b, p. 296.
[80] Eagleton 2001, p. 114; see Eagleton 2003b, p. 277.
[81] See Eagleton 2003b, p. 40.
[82] Eagleton 2003b, p. 288.

The reason for bringing Christian theology into contact with Marxism once again is that the distinctly political gospel of the former provides an ontological depth to Marxism, an exacerbation of the stakes into the absolute opposition of evil and good, sin and repentance, forgiveness and grace, all of which turn on the notion of *metanoia*, a radical transformation that may be translated from the Greek as revolution. All of Eagleton's various theological reflections, from those on evil and history, through the cluster of terms – confession, forgiveness, repentance, redemption and *metanoia* – with sin as their un-named centre, asceticism, martyrdom, to self-sacrifice and tragedy, turn on the question of christology. He is, if you like, a radically christocentric thinker. But this should come as no surprise for anyone who has read *The New Left Church* and *The Body as Language*, for here the efforts to integrate theology, literature and politics or to incorporate linguistic theory and Marxism into theology hinge on christology, although of a distinctly sacramental or eucharistic form. Thus, in linking the historical movement for liberation to Christianity, Marxism too, it would seem, is complete only in christology:

> Unlike the marxist, however, the christian recognises the risen Christ as the ground of this historical movement. He believes this because Christ, uniquely, *is both a body and a language*: he is an animal, yet an animal with the universal availability of a language, the word of God. In him, we can achieve at the level of physical union a fully human, expressive and universal communication; in him, language and bodiliness finally converge into a single life.[83]

I have a number of questions concerning this nub of his rediscovered radical theological past, and so it is best to list them first before delving into more detail: the nature of that relationship with his earlier theological thought; the lack of reference to that other current with which his position has so much in common, namely liberation theology and its influence in Western theological and New-Testament studies; the favouring of certain christological metaphors (legal, sacrificial, exemplary, political and collective) over against others; the

[83] Eagleton 1970, p. 12; italics in text. One other example: 'Socialism…is the drive to integrate the global communication which capitalism historically opened up with the sensuous concrete life it needed to negate. Its final significance for the christian thus centres on Christ: on the universal word made animal' (Eagleton 1970, p. 22).

deep desire for a historical Jesus; and the immense difficulties raised by such a resolute focus on a redeemer figure (the problem of the personality cult).

Theology redivivus?

As for Eagleton's first incarnation as a theologian, let me pause for a while with the question of form, for his earlier arguments follow what will by now be an all too familiar path, except that here we have the laying of the first stones. Thus, in his discussion of language and world, or, rather, sensuous life, in *The Body as Language*[84] he runs through various theoreticians – Barthes, Mallarmé, Wittgenstein, McLuhan, Merleau-Ponty, Basil Bernstein's research into the differences between middle-class and working-class language, the German idealist Jacobi and Saussure, all through the filter of Marx[85] – to argue two distinctions, between the creative and destructive functions of language itself and between the immediate nature of bodily gesture and the mediated universality of other communication (from gifts to television). On the first point, language is not only the gateway into history and the 'world', the step away from immediate sensuous life, but also the way human beings escape that world, building distance from such a history. In other words, the very means of history's emergence is also the means by which alienation from it is produced; as signs, language is the medium of human experience, but it is, at the same time, the transformation and manipulation of signs into fetishes that alienate experience, the world and human relationships; or, as he puts it, sin. As far as the second distinction is concerned, the disjunction of bodily communication and the extended body of other forms of communication folds back into the first distinction, since mediated communication opens up a host of possibilities for both human community and alienation. The culmination of the argument lies in nothing other than christology, although here Eagleton puts it in terms of the eucharist. Stepping through Merleau-Ponty's argument that the body itself is already a type of language, a means of symbolic communication with the world, he argues that, in the eucharist, one finds

[84] See an earlier version of this argument in Eagleton 1966a, pp. 73–84.

[85] And this is a pared down list: see the original article he plundered for the first chapter of *The Body as Language*, where we find Ernst Cassirer, Lévi-Strauss, Sartre and others in an intense effort to include just about everybody who counted along with some who did not (Eagleton 1968b).

the dissolution of the distinction between body and language, and between unmediated and mediated communication. The key here for Eagleton is the Roman-Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation: in the same way that, at the moment one consumes the elements of the eucharist, they cease to be bread and wine and become the body of Christ, which they must do for communication to become fully transparent, so also the destructive disjunction at the heart of language, between sign and reality, the alienation between human beings and between humans and the world, is overcome and reconciliation emerges. Transubstantiation therefore means that the 'sensuous immediacy' of Christ's body is at one with the universal media of bread and wine:

> Christ's self-giving in the eucharist is globally available, achieved through material products in which all are able to share, but nevertheless bodily direct because what is given in those symbols is nothing less than himself.[86]

The determined march of Eagleton's argument towards christology is all here in one of his earliest works: as far as the form is concerned, nothing much has changed over three decades later. What has changed, at least on first appearances, is the content of the argument: the strange feeling of reading these earlier works comes his passionate attachment to the Roman-Catholic liturgy, understood as a 'symbolic re-embodying of the meanings of the revolution'.[87] His two favourite sacraments are the eucharist and marriage,[88] and he often compares the sensuousness of the former with the fleshly euphoria of the latter. Rather than the political christology of his later texts, what we see in the first publications is a eucharistic christology and politics. There is nothing of the need for a historical Jesus (see below), for all of the christological reflections must pass through the medium of the mass.

---

[86] Eagleton 1970, p. 36.

[87] Eagleton 1970, pp. 114–15. Or: 'The liturgy, then, is a political force – a force constantly working to transform human society into its own, communal image' (Eagleton 1966b, p. 13).

[88] 'Marriage, of course, is traditionally connected with the imagery of banquet, dance and eucharist because it represents a free communication of bodies richly expressive of a fully personal community. In this sense it symbolises the transcendence of the estrangements discussed in this book' (Eagleton 1970, p. 109). Althusser's strictures against this movement in the Roman-Catholic Church, as a subtle re-imposition of the Church's oppressive measures relating to sex, might have been mentioned to Eagleton when he was writing this (see Chapter Three).

Yet, when we read more closely, the terrain becomes all too familiar. Contemporary theory, Marxism, christology are by now well-worn nodes in the work I have discussed thus far, but when we peer behind the eucharistic screen, a number of familiar items tumble out: sacrament as signifier, importance of sacrifice, evil, revolutionary implications of Christ's death and resurrection, and the significance of the downtrodden. Inevitably, form has given out to content, so let me take but one example of content, that of the *anawim*.

The appearance of the *anawim*, or more properly *'anawim*, in *Sweet Violence* and *The Gatekeeper* are hardly new, for they are integral to the argument of *The Body as Language*. Eagleton is no Hebrew scholar, but he makes significant theological mileage from the term, glossing it as 'destitute and dispossessed'.[89] But there is a tension in the Hebrew term between the older consonantal text and the vowels overlayed by the Masoretic scribes in the 9th century CE. Sometimes, the vowels indicate an alternative reading, and such is the case with *'anawim*: the consonants read *'anawim* (bowed down and humble) but the vowels *'anayim* (poor and wretched). The overlap between *'anawim* and *'anayim* suggests that the poor and oppressed are also, in God's eyes, the humble and pious, in all the best senses of the term.

So what does Eagleton make of the *'anawim*? The couple of references in *The Gatekeeper* become central in the final chapter of *Sweet Violence* and, not surprisingly, *The Body as Language* from 1970. They are, as I noted, for Eagleton the 'destitute and dispossessed':

> St Paul refers to them rather colourfully as 'the shit of the earth'. The *anawim* are the dregs and refuse of society, its tragic scapegoats. They are the flotsam and jetsam of history who do not need to abandon themselves to be remade, since they are lost to themselves already. And it is with them that Yahweh identifies. He will be known for what he is, in the words of Luke 1:53, when you see the mighty cast down and the lower orders exalted, the hungry filled with good things and the rich sent away empty. The true sacrificial figure, the one which like the burnt offering will pass from profane to powerful, loss of life to fullness of it, is the propertyless and oppressed.[90]

---

[89] Eagleton 2003b, p. 277.
[90] Ibid.

In itself, there is nothing wrong with his effort to democratise the notion of the scapegoat by means of the *'anawim*, the poor and the pious. Eagleton does precisely that with his closing sentences of *Sweet Violence*,[91] stressing that it is the majority of today's world that is dispossessed, and not just certain minorities. The *'anawim* are, then, in a dizzying sweep, the vast and various working classes scattered throughout the globe for whom the ancient and not so ancient scapegoats and *pharmakoi* and Christs of tragedy and beyond have moved out of their small circle to join the multitude.

As far as this argument is concerned, nothing much has changed from 1970. One sample from *The Body as Language*:

> These men – the *anawim* of the old testament whom Christ speaks of in the beatitudes – are the 'dirt' which falls outside the carefully wrought political structures of society, those whom society cannot accommodate; as such they stand as a living challenge to its institutions, a potent and sacred revolutionary force.… The *anawim* are the embodied negativity of each *status quo*, and as such focus its breaking-point; they are thus, themselves, a kind of contradiction: an expressive sign of human failure and limitation which yet, by pinpointing so exactly the limits of a social order, the points where it tails off into chaos, offers a positive symbol for the future.… The *anawim* – the scum and refuse of society – have, like all dung, a contradictory status: the more they reveal dissolution and decay, the more politically fertile they become.[92]

If there is a difference with the later material, it lies in the ecclesial and sacramental stress of *The Body as Language* – 'the *anawim*, like the ecclesial sacraments, are signs effective only insofar as they tend to their own abolition'[93] – but even this focus fades somewhat as Eagleton presses the political point. And that is exactly the same as in *Sweet Violence*: the *'anawim* are just like Marx's proletariat,[94] although Eagleton neglects to note that they are more

---

[91] Eagleton 2003b, p. 296.
[92] Eagleton 1970, pp. 67–8, 70; Eagleton 1968a, pp. 21–2.
[93] Eagleton 1970, p. 69; Eagleton 1968a, p. 22.
[94] The same quotation from *The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* appears (Eagleton 1970, p. 68; Eagleton 1968a, p. 22 and Eagleton 2003b, p. 288). 'A class must be formed within human society which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal, and which does not claim a particular redress because the wrong which is done to it is not a

like the undesirable lumpenproletariat from whom no good can come. As one of the *'anawim*, Christ brings out the truth of God's concern with them in the Bible, namely that the lowly will be raised up only through the utmost abjection and desolation. Even the deep contradiction of the *'anawim* remains the same, for like the anthropological category of the sacred (Eagleton makes the same argument, using many of the same texts from Mary Douglas) in which dirt is both rejected and valued, Christ and the *'anawim* embody the simultaneously destructive and redemptive forces that lie at the heart of political revolution.

The last chapter of *Sweet Violence*, then, is a rewrite of the penultimate chapter, 'Politics and the Sacred', from *The Body as Language*. The latter is much sparser, restricted to Mary Douglas's[95] work on dirt from *Purity and Danger* and the *'anawim* themselves, while *Sweet Violence* fills out the picture with everything from ancient Greek tragedy to *Moby Dick*. But all *Sweet Violence* does is spell out in more detail the same argument from the earlier text: the value of Christ's death and resurrection, along with various other pieces from literature and anthropology, lies in the political implications for revolution.

The desire for a historical Jesus

But what interests me about Eagleton's christological reflections is that they rely on a particular construction of the historical Jesus. We have any number of historical reconstructions: the ethical example of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism (Adolf von Harnack's 'fatherhood of God and brotherhood of Man'); the apocalyptic visionary and wonder-worker of Albert Schweitzer; the eschatological prophet of Edward Schillebeecx; the wondering wisdom teacher of Robert Funk; and, of course, Jon Dominic Crossan's political peasant. But Jesus has been and still can be the first feminist, a gay blade, a leader of a group of small businessmen, the first greenie, the Wicked Priest or the Teacher of Righteousness from Qumran, the first advertising executive, as well as, in his spare time, the Son of God.

---

particular wrong but wrong in general'. In *The Body as Language* he quotes the first part of the sentence, in *Sweet Violence* the whole thing, minus 'within human society'.

[95] Although Eagleton insists on calling her Mrs Douglas in a polite relic. The argument in Eagleton 2003b, pp. 289–90 summarises the material in Eagleton 1970, pp. 60–6.

Viewed in the context of such a wealth of historical Jesus studies, which Eagleton himself does not provide, he speculates and assumes a particular Jesus, a figure with a political and redemptive mission who sought to overcome pain and suffering, who lived and died as a martyr in the service of others, and whose death is nothing other than a tragic event with redemptive possibilities. The short-hand for Eagleton's Christ, if its repetition is anything to go by, is the 'executed political criminal' or just the political criminal: 'It is one of the more grisly ironies of the Christian gospel that when God finally got around to putting in a disgracefully belated appearance in the world he had created, he did so as a political criminal'.[96] Yet there is nothing particularly new here, particularly in light of his own background with the Catholic Left, the neglected liberation theology and the more recent work of the likes of Crossan.

However, my question is why such a figure, the executed political criminal, needs to be based in some historical reconstruction. Eagleton does not offer any methodological criteria for his reconstruction (and these are myriad in biblical studies). Rather, Eagleton operates in a way very familiar from biblical studies: so we find phrases such as 'sounds like' and 'seems to regard', along with occasional assertions of certitude: 'no doubt', 'plainly' or 'clearly presented'. All of which is based on taking some of the gospel passages, particularly those concerning healing and the passion narratives, as in some way representative of how Jesus actually might have acted, thought and felt.

I want to register my scepticism here not merely concerning Eagleton's historical Jesus, but of any search whatsoever.[97] However, the more interesting question is not whether we can recover any historical kernel concerning the historical Jesus, but why Eagleton in particular wants to do so. What is there to gain by arguing that the political criminal actually has some connection to whoever Jesus might have been? Quite a bit, it seems to me. Obviously, there is the force that it gives to his argument, especially for one committed to historical materialism as a method. In the case of Jesus, however, the whole situation becomes much more acute, for the authorial weight of this figure, even on a minimal cultural level, means that what Jesus might have said and felt will be more significant than that of any other figure. I suggest that this is the

[96] Eagleton 2001, p. 122.
[97] See Moore 1997.

case even with Eagleton's assumed readership in these later works, namely the cultural and political Left (although his readership is extremely broad these days) let alone any ecclesial or religious audience.

Christological metaphors

Eagleton's recourse to a historical Jesus who keeps threatening to disappear into the fog of history and endless biblical scholarship, must therefore be understood as a rhetorical strategy, one that he uses to increase the force of his arguments irrespective of the historical Jesus. Eagleton would have been better off writing that his historical Jesus is but one representation among a host of others, one that is distinctly useful for his own argument, but a representation nonetheless that has no necessary historical verifiability. In fact, this is precisely what Eagleton does in his christological work, selecting certain metaphors and images that he must base in some putative historical figure. His preference is for legal, sacrificial, exemplary, political, collective, and earlier on, liturgical motifs that can be found, among others, in the New Testament and subsequent biblical and theological reflection.

Invariably, these images and metaphors run over and through one another, so it is useful to distinguish between them in order to see what Eagleton favours and avoids. Let me begin with the legal metaphor. Here is Eagleton: 'Jesus is God in the shape of human frailty, no longer the judge on the bench but the political criminal who becomes an advocate alongside us in the dock'.[98] Eagleton contrasts two images of God: Satan and Jesus.[99] If the one comes through as accuser and judge, who watches our every step and deed and rewards us accordingly, the other is our co-defendant in the dock, the 'friend', as he puts it in a favoured phrase drawn from the early theological writings, 'of the shit of the earth'.[100] But such a metaphor has a venerable biblical pedigree, from the notion in the Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy to Kings) that (dis)obedience will lead to punishment or blessing, through the image of the accuser and redeemer of property and blood (the *go'el*) in the book of Job, to the representation of Jesus's death and resurrection as the payment of

[98] Eagleton 2003a, p. 140.
[99] See Eagleton 2003b, p. 210.
[100] Eagleton 2001, p. 122.

a legal penalty for sin. Contrary to Eagleton's sharp distinction between the Judge-Satan (the vengeful God of the Hebrew Bible) to the Defendant-Jesus (the God of love in the New Testament), both images are part of the complex imagery of God. Thus, Jesus acts as defence counsel for us sinners before a God who seeks to punish us for our wrongdoings. Yet, when he gets to this point, in a discussion of the Protestant Milton, it is no longer acceptable:

> In a classically Protestant scenario, Christ's love is needed to shield us from the Father's wrathful justice, as a sympathetic defence attorney might save you from a grilling at the hands of a particularly irascible judge.[101]

The differences are subtle: instead of God switching from judge to co-defendant in the person of Jesus, here we have Jesus defending us from God. I must confess I cannot see that much difference: the legal metaphor has merely switched sides, at one moment used favourably and at another, more Protestant moment, less so. But I suspect that Eagleton wants to avoid the doctrine of substitutionary atonement: in this case, innocent Jesus takes the punishment that is rightfully ours.

Skirting the other side of substitutionary atonement is Eagleton's liking for the scapegoat, the tragic dimension of christology: in this case, the scapegoat, or the red heifer in the Hebrew Bible, has the sins of the community symbolically and ritually placed upon it before being banished to the wilderness where it comes to a slow and painful death. As I indicated above, the notion of the scapegoat comes close the heart of Eagleton's christology in a distinctly political sense. For he stays not with the redeemed community (he will return there), but the scapegoat and all who are like it: the rejected, repressed and banished majority of the earth's population.

Overlapping the notion of the scapegoat but dragged by Eagleton in another direction is sacrifice. In his earlier texts, he is more concerned with recovering the sacrificial aspect of the mass, but that was within the context of the Church.[102] Still inside, however uncomfortably, he is much happier with the mystery of the eucharist. The liturgy is the means of transferring Christ's redemptive activity to human beings through the specific reception of Christ in the elements:

---

[101] Eagleton 2003b, p. 210.
[102] See Eagleton 1970, pp. 42–9; Eagleton 1968b, pp. 28–30.

> Christ is present in the eucharist, not simply as the risen man who has crossed the frontier of historical reality into heaven, but in the eternal action of his *transitus*; he is present in his sacrificial act of grasping and surpassing the ultimate boundaries of history, submitting to limit in order to transcend it. It is in this that his death is genuinely redemptive.[103]

But, by the early years of the new millennium, the question of sacrifice becomes one of self-sacrifice, as I pointed out above. Apart from the obvious political point, the reason Eagleton is keen on self-sacrifice is that it is closely connected with free will, a willing sacrifice of oneself for others. Thus, while the scapegoat bears with it one aspect of the whole complex of sacrifice, namely the appeasement of capricious gods, Eagleton is not particularly taken with this aspect of sacrifice, for a capricious, wilful God, one whom we find time and again in the Hebrew Bible, has been carefully excised from Christian and Jewish thought. Out of the whole complex of sacrifice – burnt offerings, sin offerings, thanksgiving, animal, grain and drink offerings, scapegoat and atonement – Eagleton fixes on a relatively modern notion, namely self-sacrifice, for which the scapegoat can give him a leg-up. In fact, all that seems to be left over in contemporary, Western notions of sacrifice is self-sacrifice: the idea that one of the highest moral acts is to offer oneself up freely for a higher cause, which most often turns out to be the nation-state in warfare, or perhaps the victims of a bus crash or earth-quake, or the saving of a drowning dog. Gone is any notion of appeasing the gods, of performing the rituals in the correct fashion to avert disaster, of eating the sacrificial victim in a communal meal, even the substitution of a sacrificial victim for the good of the community. But it is a long way from the scapegoat to self-sacrifice, for the scapegoat, sent into the wilderness to die for the community, is hardly a willing victim, one who chooses to do so out of pure altruism.

In this respect, the cover illustration of *Sweet Violence* is telling. A detail from Caravaggio's 'The Sacrifice of Isaac' from around 1600 CE, it depicts Abraham's knife descending to carve up Isaac's neck. A hand appears from the left, and Abraham's face is averted in the moment that stays the sacrifice itself. I do not want to delve into the intricacies of the narrative of Genesis 22, but the point here is that Isaac is hardly a willing victim.[104] Indeed, Abraham

---

[103] Eagleton 1970, p. 44.
[104] Boer 2000.

can make no sense of Yahweh's command to go up to Moriah and offer up the son on whom the divine promise of a people rests.

Hardly accidental, then, that when Eagleton does get around to writing of the Akedah (which he does not call it), he reads not the Hebrew text, but Kierkegaard's discussion in *Fear and Trembling*, and he focuses not on Isaac, the sacrificial victim, but Abraham.[105] Heavily Christianised in a distinctly Lutheran sense, Kierkegaard plays on the paradox of faith: Abraham, the model for any believer,[106] does not retreat from the command to sacrifice his son, knowing full well that once Isaac was dead he would not be restored to him, that the promise of a people from Isaac would come to an end. And yet, precisely because Abraham does not give up on 'his desire for the impossible', the desire that Isaac will be restored to him even while he obeys the order to sacrifice, does God come to the rescue, stay the knife on its downward path and point to the ram in the thicket. Unlike many of the critics he cites in *Sweet Violence*, Eagleton is quite taken with this reading of Kierkegaard's,[107] which he lines up with Lacan's interpretation of Antigone and, of course, Christ's crucifixion. Neither Abraham, nor Antigone, nor Christ is socially acceptable or ethically prudent, given to some universal or collective benefit or *telos*. Abraham's faith takes him beyond anything that is acceptable, relinquishing the universal, ethical and rationally political, and even tragedy itself, 'abandoning everything, bringing his joy in the world to nothing, without any sure guarantee of a return'.[108] The hand that desperately grasps the end of the rope finally lets go. This is tragedy at its deepest level for Eagleton, one that he will identify at the core of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But what has happened here? To begin with, in the 'sacrifice of Abraham' the ethical and social coding of self-sacrifice that I identified initially has gone, for, in Eagleton's reliance on Kierkegaard, ethics and the universal are discarded as so much useless baggage on the way up Mount Moriah. Yet, a profound slippage has taken place in the focus on Abraham: he is not the sacrifice but the one who offers up a sacrifice, Isaac. However, Eagleton insists

---

[105] See Eagleton 2003b, pp. 44–5. Kierkegaard 1995, Volume 5, pp. 7–111; Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 1–176.

[106] Eagleton 2003b, p. 52; here he is dependent on Paul in Romans 4.

[107] Elsewhere, he is less impressed: he speaks of Kierkegaard's 'tragic elitism' (Eagleton 2003b, p. 51) that is not far from T.S. Eliot.

[108] Eagleton 2003b, p. 45.

in taking Abraham as the centre of this story, the one who makes the impossible sacrifice.[109] Eagleton's christocentism is guilty here, for the ease of the connection between Abraham and Christ may work in terms of tragedy, of the absolute dereliction of both before an inscrutable God. But it does not work in any sacrificial sense: whereas Christ offers himself, Abraham offers his son. If anything, the type of Christ – following the long Christian interpretive strategy of typology between the Old and New Testaments – in Genesis 22 is Isaac, not Abraham, who is not about to roast himself willingly on the altar. Ultimately, the narrative of Genesis 22 is a different model of sacrifice that ill suits any notion of self-sacrifice. In response to an unfathomable and capricious command from God, Abraham proceeds to offer what is most precious – his 'only' son (forgetting Ishmael) in this particular divine economy – in order to appease God. The hook at the end, the ram in the bush, hardly provides a model of faith but one of complete subservience to God.

Neither the scapegoat, nor even the Akedah in Genesis 22, can be read in terms of self-sacrifice, in terms of Eagleton's favoured martyr living a life in negation of the self. Self-sacrifice, then, must be read in a christological fashion, for which Jesus's willingness to die as a sacrifice is crucial. In order to get to this point, he makes some swift moves through the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Even though sacrifice hinges, he admits, on appeasing the gods, this is not what he finds in the Hebrew Bible. Ignoring the vast amount of material on sacrifice as precisely such appeasement, he focuses on a few prophetic texts from Isaiah 1 and Amos 5 where such practices are castigated as mere hypocrisy. Catch-cries of the social justice elements of the Christian churches, they are but one dimension of a multifarious and highly contradictory collection of literature in the Hebrew Bible.[110] But they serve his purpose, since he can then jump to the New Testament, specifically the letters of Paul[111] and the letter to the Hebrews that he enlists here. The very high christology of

---

[109] Eagleton 2003b, p. 60.

[110] Similarly, his suggestion that 'the Old Testament is among other things a record of Yahweh's unenviable struggle to persuade his people that he is not a nature god to be appeased or manipulated, but the god of freedom and justice' (Eagleton 2003b, p. 277) casts a heavy theological hand over a collection of texts in which Yahweh is often but one god among others, and usually in a minority position.

[111] Although he favours Paul's letter to the Romans elsewhere, he does not specify which letters of Paul – the seven letters of New-Testament criticism (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon) or the thirteen of the canon and the Church.

Hebrews (not one that I can see Eagleton being enthused about in its full regalia) comes in use for a supersessionist moment, especially Hebrews 9: 12[112] where Christ is both sacrificed and sacrificer, victim and high priest, doing one last time what had gone on unendingly in the Hebrew Bible. In his own death, Christ brings to abrupt halt the long line of propitiatory sacrifice, but it allows Eagleton to make his point: 'This definitive consigning of ritual sacrifice to the past involves redefining it in ethical rather than cultic terms as a self-giving for others.... As a mutual self-giving, it is no longer an esoteric ritual but the structure of sociality'.[113] Anyone who has been to mass or the eucharist for the first time might beg to differ, but, just in case this argument sounds a little too supersessionist, a little too much a Christian reading, he argues that it is consistent with the Jewish law, as any 'pious Jew' would agree.[114] The problem is that he quotes a Jewish scribe from, of all places, the gospel of Mark (not, say, the Hebrew Bible or perhaps a rabbinic source) to make his point: that justice, loving one's neighbour, is far more important than sacrifice.

And so we have self-sacrifice as the crucial motif of Eagleton's ethical and political christology. The problem is that, as far as the passion narratives of the synoptic gospels are concerned, Jesus is hardly a willing victim, except perhaps in the gospel of John, following the will of a Father whose command he does not understand. The notion of self-sacrifice selects a small element of the metaphors of the Christ's death in the New Testament and elevates it to a key feature. Other metaphors also abound in the New Testament, such as the court scene, the scapegoat, sacrifice itself in terms of sin offering, but also the cosmic battle with the devil, the notion of Christ as warrior and victor in the battle with death, substitutionary atonement (bearing the sins of the world), the guarantor of eternal life, and the martyred political figure.

A major reason, I would suggest, for Eagleton's fondness for self-sacrifice and martyrdom lies is his two major christological categories, the political and the exemplary. Political figures and models work much better if they are willing victims, dying for a cause in a situation where they have at least chosen

---

[112] Eagleton lists it as Hebrew 9: 11, but his quotation comes from verse 12: 'he entered once for all the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood'. Curiously, Eagleton adds '[of sacrifice]' after 'Holy Place', when the text seems to be referring to both to the Holy of Holies in the temple and the metaphorical holy place of heaven.

[113] Eagleton 2003b, p. 277.

[114] Ibid.

to be part of a political movement. Their deaths then become a consequence of such a political choice, a martyrdom rather than a death that appeases the powers that be. Lenin, or Christ, or Che Guevara would not be so appealing if they had been press-ganged into their respective political movements. Cannon fodder would perhaps be a better term for this type of sacrifice. By contrast, political martyrs function above all as exemplars, and the old christological motif of *Christus exemplum* renders the life and death of Jesus Christ something we can follow. So often this has become a private affair, the realm of the sacrosanct individual who gains his or her individuality by offering his allegiance to the state in a Rousseauesque social contract. Thus, the individual believer must seek to avoid sin, pray to the 'Father', be prepared for persecution for their faith, live out their moral life in the context of that supreme collective, the family.

Over against such a privatisation, Eagleton, like others on the Christian Left, refuses to break the link between Christ as exemplar and as political figure, and so the exemplary dimensions of Jesus's life and death become those of an asceticism that stands against a socio-economic evil with ontological depth, that offers a radical transformation, a *metanoia* in which confession, repentance and forgiveness are political and collective acts rather than purely private ones. With the weight so heavily on the exemplary political leader, Eagleton's christology ends up being one with a strong moral code, a political ethics that shows up how Roman-Catholic he still is: 'The Judaeo-Christian tradition plucks an ethico-political meaning from the cyclical cult of sacrifice and seasonal round of fertility.... The natural now becomes a metaphor for the ethical and historical'.[115] And the prime context for the political and collective dimension of Christ the exemplar becomes the Church, ideally a model in its own right of a just society.

The problem of the personality cult

In itself, there is nothing particularly wrong with Eagleton's focus on certain christological metaphors in order to recover Jesus as a political exemplar, apart from the fact that he would like to base such a christology on the historical Jesus. I do, however, have much deeper misgivings about the need for a

[115] Eagleton 2003b, p. 287.

redeemer figure at all that becomes the model for our own political activity. And that problem is one that has bedevilled the Left in terms of the personality cult.

Political paradigm, moral exemplar, executed political criminal, forerunner to a better world – even in these terms, Jesus is still a redeemer figure for Eagleton. But the problem with redeemer figures is that embarrassing question of the personality cult. Fidel Castro, Lenin, Che Guevara, Mao Zedong, Stalin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg, Emma Goldman, and, of course, Marx himself, no matter how much part of the collective struggle or effort to establish 'actually existing socialism', have ended up iconic figures, sources of hope and targets of vilification. It is not that the personality cult is endemic only to the Left, but there is a fundamental problem that arises from Eagleton's christology. Symptomatic, then, is his criticism of Stalinism in terms of tragedy. Taking Stalinism as the name of paradox, 'the fact that socialism proved least possible where it was most necessary',[116] he argues that all the best intentions of socialism flip over into a martial and oppressive state due to the fact that socialism emerged only in marginal and impoverished places where it became the means of enforced modernisation and not of a step beyond modern capitalism.

For Eagleton, Stalinism is the paradox of actually existing socialism, predicated on the fact that no First-World country became communist. But let me take a different tack that does not rely on what might have been. And that other way of formulating the problem is, in theological terms, idolatry. In order to get there, let me move via Adorno to the Hebrew Bible. I want to make use here of a criticism I will develop more fully in my chapter on Adorno, namely that Christology itself is the basis of the problem of the personality cult. The two points from Adorno's work that I pick up are his ban on images and the inverse logic of Christology.

Adorno was to take the ban on any graven image [*phesel*] or likeness [*temunah*] of God from Exodus 20: 4 and Deuteronomy 5: 8 and elevate it into the *Bilderverbot*, the ban on images that becomes the empty centre, the nonconcept of his aesthetic and utopian theory. But the *Bilderverbot* is also a ban on idolatry itself. The way such a ban is relevant to Christology comes in the discussion of anti-Semitism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Here, Adorno

[116] Eagleton 2003b, p. 240.

and Horkheimer argue not so much that the divinisation of Christ enables the divinisation of other human beings. Rather, it is precisely the humanisation of the absolute in Christ, God becoming a human being, that facilitates the divinisation of human figures. The argument relies on the Christological motif of the fully human and divine natures of Christ, the meeting of immanence and transcendence in one person. In the same way that we may only arrive at immanence through a radical transcendence (Christ), so also transcendence emerges through absolute immanence (personality cult). The dialectic is vicious: only as God could Jesus become a human being, and only as a complete human being can he be God. Thus, in Christology itself, the more Christ is humanised, the more he becomes a god, that is, an idol. So also with any other human being.

Thus, in Eagleton's case, the absence of traditional Christological doctrines such as the two natures of Christ or Trinitarian ponderings pushes his christology of the executed political criminal inexorably into the dialectical logic of the argument of Horkheimer and Adorno. The political Jesus, exemplar of a revolutionary ethics, whose asceticism, healing of the sick and self-denial of the martyr we can follow as fundamental criticisms of this world and symbols of the world to come, is nothing other than the very human Jesus. Hence the need for a historical Jesus, for observations that he 'would no doubt have shared the mythological opinion of his age that suffering could be the work of evil spirits',[117] for comments on the limits that indicate his humanity. And so it seems that, in the act putting before us a human, political Jesus, Eagleton unwittingly divinises him all the more. For it is through the most human of his traits that he becomes God. The same logic applies to his reading of the truly tragic nature of Christ's death and resurrection. As I noted earlier, Eagleton makes the perfectly orthodox theological point that Christ's death can only be redemptive if he plumbed the depths of despair, turned out to be an abject failure whose mission had come to naught. Only as fully human can he be divine, only as fully abandoned on the cross can redemption take place. According to the logic that Adorno and Horkheimer identify at the heart of traditional Christological deliberations, Eagleton could not have taken a better path to rendering Christ an idol. Far more effective than trotting out arguments for the divinity of Christ or the Son of God. As long as he is locked

[117] Eagleton 2003b, p. 34.

into his resolutely christological reflections, this particular doctrinal history will come back to haunt him.

However, Eagleton's passion for christology and the inherent problem of idolatry is, on one level at least, no different from the Left's proclivity to redeemer figures and the cult of the personality. A futile response, it seems to me, is simply to refuse any manifestation of the personality cult, for we will end up in a trap like that of Eagleton. He has, however, taken a step in the right direction. Explicit in Eagleton and implicit in Adorno, the rejection of the long tradition of theology puts a halter on theoretical reflection in the Left. Yet Eagleton's strategy of picking up certain elements from that tradition, especially the political christology that runs through his work, returns to the snares of theological thought itself. What I want to call Adorno's theological suspicion is, to my mind, a much better path to follow: theology is far too important to shunt off to a siding, both for understanding the history of the Left and its theoretical deliberations as well as the issues that continue to vex it, but any engagement requires a decent dose of theological suspicion, wary of the traps that open up all too regularly.

An intrinsic Eagleton? (The question of ecclesiology)

While I am deeply suspicious of Eagleton's valorisation of christology as a model for left politics, one of the most enticing and puzzling features of his work is his liking for the intrinsic and purposeless. As I passed through my argument thus far, the list of items that exist for their own sake, for their own enjoyment or otherwise, grew to include evil, the Devil, creation, God, art, literature and humanity.

However, I want to ask what is being excluded in Eagleton's espousal of autotelism. To begin with, there is his well-known argument that art replaces religion. From there, I move on to ethics, theology and Eagleton himself. As for art and religion, in an argument that mutates a little over time, Eagleton argues that art has come to take on many of the functions of religion as the latter declined in the West. Or at least some of art's major proponents felt that it should and could become the religion of a secular age. Thus reverence for the aesthetic replaces a religious transcendence lost in the bleary, disenchanted post-Enlightenment world. Both religion and art

> are symbolic forms; both distill some of the fundamental meanings of a community; both work by sign, ritual and sensuous evocation. Both aim to edify, inspire and console, as well as to confront a depth of human despair or depravity which they can nonetheless redeem by form or grace. Each requires a certain suspension of disbelief, and each links the most intense inwardness to the most unabashedly cosmic of questions.[118]

It is not just that art derives in various ways from religious art, argues Eagleton, but that art is in a strong sense the replacement for religion.

What does draw my eye in this argument are some crucial slippages and assumptions, and then, ultimately, the defence of religion against art. 'Religion' is, of course, a code word for Christianity, which, in its turn, stands in at second remove as the generalising term for Roman Catholicism – an easy point to make by now but one that is worth reiterating. As for art itself, Eagleton slips literature in through a trapdoor at various points without drawing undue attention to its arrival. At one level, literature can hardly be separated from the realm of art, but when his examples include Matthew Arnold, F.R. Leavis, Coleridge, Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, I.A. Richards, Henry James and Iris Murdoch then we cannot help but feel that he is, in fact, speaking about a very specific English tradition that stands in not only for literature in general, but art. What we get by the end of these slippages is not so much an argument that art replaces religion, or at least that some people have tried to do so, but that English literature replaces Christianity.

With this in mind, let me return to the Eagleton's infatuation with autonomy:

> The metaphor of artistic 'creation' has always been latently theological, a reenactment of God's fashioning of the world ex nihilo. And just as the world is autonomous of its creator (which is part of what is meant by calling him 'transcendent'), so the work of art is mysteriously self-generating and self-dependent, conjuring itself up miraculously out of sheer nothingness, obedient to no law but that of its own unique being.[119]

Art replaces religion, taking on the mantle of autonomy: one intrinsic self-generating system takes the place of another. Or is that English literature

---

[118] Eagleton 2003a, pp. 96–7.
[119] Eagleton 2003a, p. 97.

replaces Christianity? The whole equation loses altitude when the lofty universals of art and religion crash down to the peculiar and parochial concerns of one religion and one tradition of literature. The problem here is not merely that the emperor finds his flabby body on ludicrous display, but that the slippage itself, from English and Christianity to art and religion, is part of a deeper universalising logic that best goes under the name of 'catholicity'. And, of course, both English and Christianity have been at the heart of a global empire on which the sun set not so long ago, the most audacious effort to universalise some curious particulars.

What Eagleton misses in this very English discussion is that the burning issue in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates that circled around the questions of Christianity, society and culture was that of morality. With the noticeable decline in Christian observance, marked, as Gramsci noted so astutely, by the fact that Christianity was no longer the untranscendable horizon of culture, commentators struggled to find something that would provide the moral undergirding for society. For some, without 'religion' chaos would ensue, since there would be no moral codes; for others, a substitute was needed, and one of those suggested was literature, or English. And it was not so much rampant copulation in the streets, theft, arson and murder of which they were afraid, but the newly conscious masses of the working class. The issue was, then, rather more crowd control, the coercion and persuasion of what Gramsci would call hegemony.

The deep debates over morality are a far cry from the autonomous and purposeless nature of both Christianity and English (or even religion and art) on which Eagleton is so keen. But his own defence of 'religion', which we have come to expect, over against art, literature and cultural studies, invokes not the inherent uselessness of Christianity but the opposite. For Eagleton, history, mass appeal, ecclesiology and the robustness of theology put it furlongs beyond art or literature, which turns out to be 'too delicate, and too impalpable, to be bent to such ambitious ideological ends'.[120] Which ends? The rendering of art into a political programme, finding an alternative mythology, or even a philosophical anthropology: it is simply not up to the task, being not even half as tough as Christianity, which has been and can be all of these things. In the end, Christianity is a mass phenomenon over against an

[120] Eagleton 2003a, p. 99.

élitist and marginal one, linking high and low culture, an intelligentsia and the people, a symbolic and arcane system with the daily lives of millions. One would have to be a dupe to miss Eagleton's unequivocal defence, from 'history's most astonishingly successful solution',[121] through 'no secular cultural project has come even remotely close to matching this extraordinary achievement',[122] to 'in terms of compass, appeal and longevity, it is far and away the most important symbolic form which humanity has ever known'.[123]

In fact, Eagleton comes close to the concern with morality and ethics that taxed intellectuals and commentators a century or two ago. As I have noted at various points above, Eagleton is intensely concerned with ethics from his earliest writings. When he argues that salvation depends on how we create community in the world and not our private love for God,[124] and when he invokes the values of self-sacrifice and martyrdom as a life of service to others, the shift from law to an ethics of the heart, or the values of humility, modesty, meekness, altruism, vision, courage, love and so forth – all coming under the umbrella of the good – in opposition to the powers of evil, and especially his profoundly ethical christology of the executed political criminal, then everywhere we look we see yet more virtues. And, as far as Eagleton is concerned, Christian theology, especially the brand with which he is familiar, provides by far the best resources for what can only be described as a moral or ethical politics.

Yet such an ethical position clanks loudly against his liking for autotelism and the intrinsic nature of God, good, evil and whatnot. Given his liking for the implicitly anticapitalist position of the uselessness of certain activities, done purely for themselves with no ultimate purpose in mind, his concern with a political ethics constitutes an almost unworkable contradiction. The whole problem comes crashing together in an important discussion of Milton, whose *Samson Agonistes* is a sustained denunciation of God's justice: 'On a Catholic view, God wills what is good; on a certain Protestant view, things are good because God wills them'.[125] Of course, the latter position is the end-run of autotelism, although characterising it as Protestant is a little too easy. Pure

[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Eagleton 2003b, pp. xvi–xvii.
[124] Eagleton 1966b, p. 6.
[125] Eagleton 2003b, p. 211.

autotelism removes God from any obligation or relation with anything outside himself. And Eagleton clearly does not like the implications: way beyond our sense of justice and love, God's justice would then be like a tarantula that 'had some notion of elegance but one light years removed from our own'.[126] In fact, it produces an entirely arbitrary and capricious God given to a vacuous and tyrannical freedom, one who is beyond rationality and justice since he created it, and, we might add, love, humility, hope and the other virtues; hence Eagleton's preference for the so-called Roman-Catholic position, which is itself as much a caricature as that of the Protestant position. It boils down to the point that there are various autotelic items, from evil to art, in which justice and love must be included. And these, it seems, exist apart from God and to them he is beholden. Is God's freedom constrained, then? You cannot have your autotelic cake and eat it too. A compromised autotelism is no autotelism at all. Either God is completely self-sufficient or he is dependent on something else.

Eagleton's holding back at the last minute, his unwillingness to pursue autotelism to its logical conclusion, is but a signal of another direction for theology in his work. For, contrary to his assertions, theology does seem to have a distinct usefulness and purpose, from providing life-giving meaning to collective integration. As his own unannounced shuffle from theology to ecclesiology indicates, theology is not as self-generating or autonomous as it would like to think (or, at least, the God upon which it bases its reflections, and then the universe he created are not self-sufficient). Apart from existing to explicate and direct the beliefs and practices of the faithful – faith seeking understanding, as Anselm would have it – theology is inescapably an ecclesiological activity, its efforts ideally directed towards the benefit of the Church, outside of which it would asphyxiate before too long.

As with theology, so also with Eagleton: if theology is not as purposeless as he would like to think, operating in the institutional and political matrix of the Church, then Eagleton theological concerns do not emerge *ex nihilo*. He is no stranger to the institution itself, having been a founding and then senior editor of the journal *Slant* in the 1960s, organiser of discussion groups, demonstrations and a conference or two in the Catholic Left, as well as a major contributor to the *'Slant' Manifesto*. Indeed, the exploration of the connections

[126] Eagleton 2003b, pp. 210–11.

between Roman Catholicism and Marxism, along with the political activism of the Catholic Left that had *Slant* at its centre was somewhat controversial in the ferment of the sixties. Hardly unaware of the ruckus they were causing – in fact, it seems as though this turmoil was one of *Slant*'s motives[127] – they were at that stage committed to reforming radically the institution itself.

And this is where we find Eagleton's explicit engagement with ecclesiology, when he still felt it necessary to argue why he remained in the Church.[128] By and large, I have operated with the assumption that theology may be understood as the ideology, in all its multifarious manifestations, of the Church; in other words, Eagleton's various theological interventions bear with them an implicit ecclesiology. However, if you dig deeply enough then an Eagleton vitally concerned with the institution emerges in a number of places, especially in *The New Left Church* and the last chapter of *The Body as Language* (which first appeared as 'Priesthood and Leninism' in 1969 in *Slant* 5: 3) and one of his contributions to the *Slant Manifesto*, the essay 'The Roots of the Christian Crisis'. Along with his love for the mystery of the eucharist, his desire to see the Roman-Catholic Church transformed from within dissipates like the mist in his later recovery of theology, apart from the odd relic.

If anything, Eagleton is more intense than Althusser in his desire for an alliance between radical Roman Catholics and the New Left more generally.[129] If Althusser called on the various fringe groups of the French Roman-Catholic Church to join with the Communists, Eagleton and the *Slant* group want to remould the Church itself. The *Slant* symposium of 7–11 September 1967, subsequently published as *From Culture to Revolution* had as its explicit agenda the bringing together of those within and outside the Church.[130] Ecclesiologically, however, Eagleton had two strategies, one an effort to recast the whole notion of priesthood in terms of the Leninist revolutionary vanguard, and the other a historical analysis of the churches (moving beyond the Roman-Catholic Church) and revolutionary movements.

As far as the latter is concerned, I am intrigued by the pattern of the argument, namely that there is no authentic radical past upon which the Catholic Left may draw. As far as the argument itself is concerned, Eagleton falls into

---

[127] See Eagleton 1966b, pp. 14, 51–2.
[128] Eagleton 1967a.
[129] See especially Eagleton 1966b, pp. 46–51.
[130] Eagleton and Wicker 1968, see also Eagleton 1967b.

the pattern of so many literary critics seeking to write history: like Raymond Williams, he draws evidence from literature such as that of Dickens, and the references to historical materials are desperately thin, quoting a little too often from one text, K.S. Inglis's *Churches and the Working Class in England*. What he tries to do is characterise the history of the churches (for once he does seek to deal with most of the Christian churches) and social movements in England in terms of three patterns: the liberal contradiction of seeking to connect with the working classes for their own 'good' on the one hand, and to ensure the churches' survival on the other; the anti-institutionalism of so-called Christian socialism, where 'socialism' meant primarily morality, relationships and the inner life over against structural change; and the problem of conservative radicalism, in which opposition to capitalism was cast in reactionary terms. All of these then become past mistakes from which the Catholic Left must learn in order to become 'authentic radicals'.[131] It turns out, then, that the Catholic Left and the work of *Slant* is decidedly new, without precedent (if he had pushed back a little further he might have come across Gerard Winstanley and the Levellers at least, if not Thomas Münzer in Germany). Whether this is true, and it seems not, there is an early glimmer here of what would become Eagleton's infatuation with autotelism, with the Catholic Left emerging *ex nihilo*, without any connection to what had gone before it. And this is a feature that recurs in his arguments for the benefit of theology for the Left many years later, without a whisper of his earlier work.

But what of the other ecclesiological fragment, the argument that the priesthood should be understood in terms of Lenin's vanguard? I must confess that, even with Eagleton's caveat – the effort 'to meet the alarmed or simply amused incredulity likely to be raised'[132] – it does not count as one of his better arguments, even if we go back to his earlier argument that the priesthood must become democratic.[133] Certainly, it flows from the argument that if the notion of the *'anawim* and of christology is one of historical and political death and resurrection, and that, if the Church is to become a revolutionary body pointing to a socialist future, then the priesthood may be understood in Lenin's terms. Further, Eagleton is influenced by at least one of the revolutionary

[131] Eagleton 1966b, p. 82.
[132] Eagleton 1970, p. 76; Eagleton 1969, p. 12.
[133] Eagleton 1966a, pp. 104–17.

priests in Latin America, as the one and only allusion in all of Eagleton's writings to liberation theology in the person of Camilo Torres indicates.[134] And, in the swirl of the sixties, anything seemed possible, from anti-medicine and an anti-hospital in which patients would be able, 'under democratic-participatory controls, to infect one another with germs in order to experience the transcendentally liberating effects of serious disease'[135] to the priesthood as a Leninist vanguard. In the confidence of those years, Marxism was, after all, 'the most elaborated revolutionary theory of our time'.[136]

There are two parts to Eagleton's argument: that the three-way dialectic between revolutionary vanguard or party, working-class rank and file and society at large is analogous to that between priesthood, laity and society; and that the priesthood in all its dimensions is a sacrament, a signifier of the Church's engagement with history. He will even valorise the discipline and hierarchy of vanguard and priesthood, 'welded together by obedience and authority'[137] as a necessary feature, although always on guard against becoming a self-serving élite rather than a movement at the service of the people. When we get to this point, what he calls the 'sacrament of order',[138] a hierarchical vanguard that is incongruously necessary for a future 'freedom-in-brotherhood',[139] then his argument begins to break down. The last phrase I quoted betrays all of the problems with such a hierarchical and disciplined body such as the priesthood: celibate, male, self-perpetuating, inherently conservative, not to mention indelibly Roman-Catholic. Try as he might, stressing incongruity, fallenness, friction, paradox and withering away, he cannot get around the road-block that he recognises a few years earlier.[140] Eagleton would once have argued that, in this respect, the priesthood has failed to live up to his expectations; now, the fact that he has avoided recycling this argument, preferring to torch any remaining copy of the book as a whole, says enough.

Not the most stunning of ecclesiological reflections, no matter how innovative they might have seemed at the time. It is not so strange, then, that his

---

[134] Eagleton 1970, p. 93; Eagleton 1969, p. 17.
[135] Eagleton 1968d.
[136] Eagleton 1970, p. 76; Eagleton 1969, p. 12.
[137] Eagleton 1970, p. 85; Eagleton 1969, p. 15.
[138] Eagleton 1970, pp. 85, 86; Eagleton 1969, p. 15.
[139] Eagleton 1970, p. 85; Eagleton 1969, p. 15.
[140] See Eagleton 1966b, p. 44.

heavy investment in *Slant* and in the Roman-Catholic Church itself should receive such scant mention in his memoir, *The Gatekeeper*, or that the elaboration in *Sweet Violence* of the same argument from the sixth chapter of *The Body as Language* on the political implications of Christ's death and resurrection should give no reference to that earlier text.

Yet I do find it strange, all the same, that there is only the slightest of allusions in his later work. For the Catholic Left and *Slant* were clearly important for Eagleton, going by the appearance in almost every issue of the journal of one piece or another by him, his role as general editor before it folded, and the listing of his own address at Jesus College, Cambridge, for correspondence concerning editorial matters. In the memoir, there is much on his role as 'gatekeeper' in the convent for enclosed Carmelite nuns, or the liberated sisters in the early hey-day of post-Vatican II, his Roman-Catholic grammar school or the brief spell at a seminary at the mature age of 13, and especially on the dissonant value of minority Roman-Catholics in a Protestant England. On this last matter, he points to the suspicion of the inner glow of private experience and subjectivism, along with the aversion to outward emotion and the Irish passion for the tribe, to the combination of sensuous symbolism and rigorous thought, to the incongruous combination of a deep pessimism about the way things are and a profound hope that they could be immeasurably better. And, like Althusser, he points to the astonishingly easy move from Roman Catholicism to Marxism without the halfway house of liberalism.[141]

Now, we might want to disagree with Eagleton's association of minority Roman Catholicism and Marxism in England, for British Marxism has as much if not more dissenting and sectarian Protestantism about it than Roman Catholicism. As Andrew Milner pointed out to me, the 'habit of bearing witness from the sidelines, whilst denouncing each other as schismatics, was surely passed from the religious to the political sects'. Yet, in light of Eagleton's suggestion in *The Gatekeeper* that, at least for him, the road from Roman Catholicism to Marxism was indeed wide, the dismissive and passing mention of *Slant* looks odd indeed. He devotes more attention to Lawrence Bright, at whose suggestion *Slant* was established and who was on the editorial committee. As for his complete absorption in the Catholic Left and *Slant* itself, this is all I could find:

---

[141] See Eagleton 2001, pp. 30–7.

> The name of the journal, indeed the very same design, was finally adopted by a porno magazine, which Lawrence spotted one day in a Soho shop-window and gleefully circulated to the former editors. Nowadays people write the odd doctoral thesis on the Catholic left, which I suppose is one up from oblivion.[142]

Not a bad dismissal, really, along with, 'Years later, when I had some reputation as a leftist theologian…'.[143] I am less interested in the motives for Eagleton's drawing of the curtain across this crucial element of his past, for favouring his involvement with a far-left political group in the 1970s over the Catholic Left, than in the effect it has on his theological reflections that appear also in the memoir. As I have argued above, there is much that the later Eagleton recycles from his earlier theological writings with nary a whisper of reference to those earlier works: they appear as it were out of nothing, fresh and new, a defence of a political or left theology that emerges only late in his work. The almost complete erasure of the politically charged Catholic Left that provided the substance of his theological thought, is expressed most clearly in the one significant new interest of these later reflections, namely the intrinsic nature of key theological concepts. Autotelism may then be read as a symptom of this repressed past.

And yet, even if the Catholic Left and the Roman-Catholic Church itself in the turmoil of the sixties were the contexts of most of Eagleton's theological positions, generated out of a desire to reform the church from within by means of Marxism,[144] this is hardly the context of Eagleton's return to theology at the turn of the millennium. By that time, he had long since left that circumscribed institutional location to become one of the leading Marxist literary and cultural critics. In contrast to his earlier desire to bring Marxism into the Roman-Catholic Church, along with the insights of contemporary linguistic theory that characterises *The Body as Language*, the scourge of the establishment seeks to bring theology into the debates within the Left. Hence the curiously idealistic image of the Church and theology that appears in these works.

---

[142] Eagleton 2001, p. 28.
[143] Eagleton 2001, p. 7.
[144] See Eagleton 1970, pp. 94–115.

Chapter Seven

The Conversion of Slavoj Žižek

Slavoj Žižek has undertaken the monumental task of re-inventing the Protestant Reformation within his own writing. Not only does he discover, in a long and convoluted search that gets lost time and again in various cul-de-sacs, the Protestant doctrine of grace, but he also wants to identify its materialist, political core. On the way he desperately tries to discard the Roman-Catholic (or should I say, Lacanian?) emphasis on ethics, law and love.

In what follows, I begin, then, with the challenge that led to Žižek's 'conversion', which I will leave in scare quotes until I can speak about it in more detail. For one who held Christianity and Marxism at the end of each arm, Žižek emerges as a proponent of both at the beginning of the new millennium. He does so, I suggest, in reponse to the challenge posed to him by Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000). While Butler points out that psychoanalysis cannot provide the basis for a viable politics, particularly because it will constantly raise the issue of the constitutive exception to any political move, Laclau picks up on the highly undeveloped status of Žižek's more recent statements in favour of Marxism. And the criticism bites, so much so that it will lead eventually to his double 'conversion', one to Christ and the other to Marx. While the 'conversion' to Marx, or,

rather, Lenin, was not possible without the 'conversion' to Christ, or, rather, Paul, and vice versa, it is not quite so balanced. Whereas Žižek will identify himself openly as a Marxist-Leninist, calling himself a 'fighting materialist' like Lenin,[1] brandishing the membership card of a party that has by and large ceased to exist, he will not make the same move for Christianity, although he does dare an occasional 'we Christians' or 'true Christians'. You will not find him sneaking off to a Reformed worship service, although he would probably spend the afternoon arguing about the sermon with the minister over a glass of wine and a cigar. However, a major reason for his turn to Pauline Christianity is that it enables Žižek to get out of the closed circuit of Lacan's psychoanalysis, to dispense in particular with the constitutive exception, no matter how much he might describe such a break in Lacanian terms. As I noted in the previous chapter, Eagleton points to the tension between Žižek's Lacanian pessimism and his giddy, optimistic style – not in terms of a necessary tension between two extremities called for in our current situation, but as a compensation. I want to suggest that the tension is even more marked between Lacan and Lenin (although Lenin does not usually come through as a bright and sunny individual). How does Žižek get from one to the other? Through the founding figure of Christianity – Paul – a necessary and by no means vanishing mediator who enables the move from one to the other.

Yet he does not get quite so far in the initial responses to Butler and Laclau, for he must first negotiate the insistent challenge from Alain Badiou. Although he will eventually draw the means of the breakout from Badiou's book on Paul, in his initial engagement with Badiou Žižek focuses on the challenge Badiou poses for psychoanalysis. And that challenge is that psychoanalysis deals, however well, with our everyday world full of quotidian exploitation, political disappointment and fundamental injustice. In Badiou's terms, this is the Order of Being, while, in Lacan's terms, it is the intertwining of law and desire – terms that are, in fact, those of Paul as well, as we saw in my discussion of Eagleton. For Badiou, the truth-event – his reading of Paul's absolute emphasis on grace, inexplicably breaks into this 'Order of Being', enabling the militant revolutionary movement of which Paul's early Christians are the prime model. Paul is, then, the revolutionary figure to whom Badiou reaches

[1] Žižek 2000, p. 1.

back beyond Lenin.[2] Žižek will later move the other way, from Paul to Lenin, but what I focus on in this section is the nature of Žižek's response to Badiou, particularly in *The Ticklish Subject*. He will answer Badiou in terms of the constitutive exception: every effort at emancipation, every 'Cause' (Žižek's preferred term for the truth-event) has to face up to the constitutive exception, to the underside that both enables the Cause to get under way in the first place and hobbles it every step of the way. And this argument renders Žižek unable to take up a distinct political position, however much he may wish to do so. What also interests me here is the way Žižek neglects other elements of Badiou's work, particularly his discussion of materialist grace to which Žižek returns only much later.

But what of the conversion? I cast this unapologetically in Protestant terms, namely the gradual and halting realisation of the implications of the theological notion of grace. The crucial distinction here will be that between ethics and gospel, or law and grace (Pauline terms, although I will dispense with Žižek's thundering capitals for these theological terms). Time and again Žižek will glimpse the materialist and political possibilities of grace, only to slip back into the realm of ethics and the law. Again, Badiou will be important, more for what Žižek misses. Initially, Žižek comes out squarely on the side of ethics (like Eagleton) and gets caught in the cul-de-sac of love, but then, later, he attempts to correct this slide into moralising by kicking the lever over onto the gospel itself. In order to locate a materialist version of grace, Žižek finally leaves Lacan, however reluctantly, in the care of the ethicists and philosophers of love, and hitches a ride with Lenin where revolutionary grace can flourish. For reasons that will become clear, I find this part of Žižek's argument one of the most intriguing and promising.

Unlike some of the other critics dealt with in this book, Žižek has no discernable past in any Church, nor do buried theological texts threaten to turn up at any moment in some second-hand bookstore on the wrong side of the railway lines. What we have instead is a plate full of later arguments, a brimming political argument placed squarely on my desk before me. So my task

---

[2] Even Badiou, let alone Žižek, is not the first 'to risk the comparison that makes of him [Paul] a Lenin for whom Christ will have been the equivocal Marx' (Badiou 2003, p. 2). Compare Žižek: 'there is no Christ outside Saint Paul; in exactly the same way, there is no "authentic" Marx' that can be approached directly, bypassing Lenin' (Žižek 2000, p. 2).

shifts from reading forgotten and actively neglected works to material that is very much part of theoretical political debate at the moment. I am interested in four main texts by Žižek and one by Alain Badiou. *The Fragile Absolute* is, in many respects, the first part of a longer work in which *On Belief* is the second part, the one Roman-Catholic, the other Protestant. *The Puppet and the Dwarf* is a bit of a mix, summarising the previous two books in consecutive chapters and filling out some gaps, except for the final and somewhat unwitting step in the path to a materialist grace.[3] Along with Alain Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*,[4] these books form the fulcrum on which my argument will turn. But then, since Žižek's many volumes may well be read as one continuous text, cut off arbitrarily due to the material limits of paper publication, the subject of the next monograph usually appears towards the close of the preceding one. For this reason, I will include in this gathering *The Ticklish Subject* and the dialogues with Laclau and Butler in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*.

The darkness of Lacan: the challenge of Butler and Laclau

To put it as bluntly as possible, it seems to me that Žižek emerges as a political writer only after the exchange with Ernesto Laclau and Judith Butler in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, and that dispensing the murk of his political credentials in terms of Leninist Marxism could happen only *with* and *by means of* Paul. The second point I will explore in the following sections on Badiou and materialist grace, for it seems to me that it is specifically Badiou's Paul that enables, eventually and with much hesitation, the crucial move for Žižek, the ability to move out of the illuminating but ultimately closed circle of Lacan's theory in order to become a political writer. But that is jumping the gun, for my interest here is with the first point. Judith Butler's criticism is that the Lacanian constitutive exception – the excluded item that is, in fact, the basis of the system in question – closes down any possibility of taking a

[3] This is not to say Žižek has not mentioned Christianity, theology or even Paul earlier (see, for instance 2, 29, 78 on Paul), but the references are fleeting and tangential. Of course, the title *For They Know Not What They Do* comes from one of the statements put in Christ's mouth on the cross: 'Father. Forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke 23: 34).

[4] Badiou 2003.

political position. In response to Butler, Žižek voices some quite traditional Marxist categories – class conflict, mode of production, the over-arching presence of capitalism – and he comes in for a beating at the hands of Laclau for this move. But Žižek has not always been so openly Marxist. In fact, up until the exchange, Žižek always distanced himself from Marxism. It was the subject of jokes or illustrations of a particular Lacanian point, usually in terms of the old Communist régimes in the former Yugoslavia or USSR, or in anecdotes about the personal lives of Marx and Engels. Žižek did, after all, hail from a 'former' Communist country, and so it would not do to identify too closely with the old guard (hence his running for president for a liberal reform party).

But let me pick up Judith Butler's challenge to Žižek: Lacanian psychoanalysis in the end closes down any possibility for what is new, for a viable politics beyond capitalism. At two points in her first contribution to the dialogues, Butler comes back to the argument that psychoanalysis forbids any step out of the system, that the way Žižek's dialectic works is to generate an impasse at the very point where such a break opens up. Firstly, on the question of hegemony, she recognises the astuteness of Žižek's many recyclings of this move, which, as I have pointed out above, relies on the notion that the remainder or surplus, or conversely the lack, that which is left out, comes to be crucial for the construction and viability of whatever is in question. Given that hegemony is not so much a description of the *status quo* but rather an inquiry into the means of political change, the key issue is that of opposition to domination. But, according to the Hegelian and Lacanian logic that Žižek employs, what happens is 'that that very point of opposition is the instrument through which domination works, and that we have unwittingly enforced the powers of domination through our participation in its opposition'.[5]

Butler is puzzled, throwing a series of questions at Žižek that all hinge on the impossibility of political action from within a Lacan read in terms of Hegel: 'But where does one go from here?' she asks. 'Does the exposition of an aporia, even a constitutive aporia at the level of the linguistic performative, work in the service of a counter-hegemonic project?'.[6] Or, quite directly, where is the possibility of something new, especially in a social and political direction? In fact, what Žižek does, suggests Butler, is pursue the other dimension of

[5] Butler in Žižek 2002, p. 28.
[6] Ibid.

hegemony, namely the myriad ways in which consent operates, particularly to what constrains and limits us.

> But what remains less clear to me is how one moves beyond such a dialectical reversal or impasse to something new. How would the new be produced from an analysis of the social field that remains restricted to inversions, aporias and reversals that work regardless of time and place? Do these reversals produce something other than their own structurally identical repetitions?[7]

Butler's questions concern not only the closed circle of Lacanian analysis, in which the break to something new is but another way we are contained within the system, but also the perpetual suspension of the domains of politics and history in the structures of Lacanian thought. In other words, how can Žižek conceive of a viable politics that seeks to have some historical impact and that remains within the aspirations of the Left? My argument here is that St Paul, initially via Badiou, provides Žižek with the beginnings of an answer, one that will set him on a path to Lenin.

But, first, in the dialogues Žižek responds with a series of points – that Butler has misunderstood Lacan on certain points, that the opposition between a structural, ahistorical Lacan and the historical arena of politics is highly problematic, that we should not succumb to a premature historicising, that Lacan's arguments have a distinctly historical and political dimension to them – but what is noticeable here is that Butler's criticism bites. Compared to his earlier texts, Žižek writes with a far greater political urgency, sounding more like Jameson than the monogamous[8] Lacanian mass-cultural aesthete (if such a thing is possible) of some of his earlier material. In the dialogues, Marx is far less the one who sits in the background amongst the jesters or finds himself usurped by Lacan: rather, he is the initial means for a Žižek seeking to respond to the criticisms and become far more directly political.

Now, for Žižek, that which is left out, the unnameable and unrepresentable ground of the political possibilities both Butler and Laclau explore, the conditions for the dispersed and shifting postmodern political subjectivities, the background to Laclau's historical narrative of the move from essentialist

---

[7] Butler in Žižek 2002, p. 29.
[8] The term is Laclau's in Žižek 2002, p. 76.

Marxism to the contingent politics of postmodernism, or to Butler's account of the shift from sexual essentialism to contingent sexual formation, is capitalism itself. Or, rather, what we have here is not 'a simple epistemological process but part of the global change in the very nature of capitalist society'.[9] Is this a much more political Lacan? In fact, it is straight Marxist theory illuminated by Lacan: the Real has become that which refuses to be historicised (the stages of capitalism) and politicised (the economy, which simply cannot be changed). What he is after is not the incompletion within a particular horizon but the exclusion that constitutes the horizon itself.

For all his detailed response to Butler's criticisms, her point remains valid, it seems to me. Despite all these attempts to correct her perception of psychoanalysis and even of Hegel, the question concerning the political possibilities of Lacanian psychoanalysis remains. As Butler points out in her second essay, Žižek conflates Lacan and Marx: capitalism becomes both the occluded and unrepresentable Real of hegemonic struggles *and* the specific background of those struggles. Or, in his effort to 'patch' Lacan into a Marxist framework, Žižek argues that capitalism is the primary condition for hegemony and that the subject as lack is the primary condition, without any explanation as to how these two primary conditions – the one historicist and the other formalist – relate to each other.[10] In other words, when he wants to make a political point Žižek turns to Marx; Lacan has to fit in somehow.

Laclau makes a similar point, although in more detail. Somewhat nonplussed by Žižek's overt Marxism in the dialogues, he writes:

> I think that Žižek's political thought suffers from a certain 'combined and uneven development'. While his Lacanian tools, together with his insight, have allowed him to make considerable advances in the understanding of ideological processes in contemporary societies, his strictly political thought has not advanced at the same pace, and remains fixed in very traditional categories.[11]

Laclau castigates him for taking terms acritically from the Marxist tradition, or more precisely from the writings of Marx himself and from the period of the Russian Revolution, without any awareness of the subsequent debates

---

[9] Žižek in Žižek 2002, p. 106.
[10] See Butler in Žižek 2002, pp. 137–9.
[11] Laclau in Žižek 2002, p. 206.

and intellectual history of the terms (Gramsci, Trotsky, Austro-Marxism and so on). Laclau cites the questions of ideology, class and capitalism, suggesting that Žižek's assertions have little argument to back them up, and that even then they are, at best, highly troubled. As far as Laclau is concerned, the Marxist categories come as a collective *deus ex machina* to render his Lacanian framework political – the obverse of Butler's take, but the point is the same. Laclau is, of course, much more enamoured with deconstruction than Žižek, and he is suspicious of any Marxist category that has not gone through the deconstructionist grinder. But the point remains: Žižek's 'discourse is schizophrenically split between a highly sophisticated Lacanian analysis and an insufficiently deconstructed traditional Marxism'.[12]

Žižek's problem as it emerges in the dialogues lies, I would suggest, in the ambiguity over the 'cure' provided by psychoanalysis. To put it crudely, whereas Freud explicitly sought an end to the analytic process, worrying when such a process failed (as with Dora), for Lacan the possibility of the end remained an open question. Would the analysand finally be cured, or was psychoanalysis a process without end? As Žižek point out in *The Ticklish Subject*, for Lacan, psychoanalysis is not psychosynthesis: there is no new harmony, no new beginning for the subject. Instead, the desired moment is the Void, a wiping the slate clean.[13] However, at the point of the dialogues with Butler and Laclau, he pursues two options. The first is to place the problem within Lacan's own development:[14] thus, the later Lacan devalues the paternal function and the importance of the Oedipal conflict and stresses that paternal authority is an imposture, a temporary stabilisation. If the early Lacan was given to conservative cultural criticism, then the later Lacan, especially from the 1960s, seeks a way out of this framework, to show that paternal authority, the symbolic order, is a fraud. This is the Lacan of the Real, which shows up the fragility of every symbolic constellation, that every historical figuration of the limit of the Real is always susceptible to radical breakdown and overhaul. And what is this Real? Capitalism itself. In other words, Lacan himself recognised the problem Butler identifies within his own theory, and his shift to emphasise the Real is his effort to deal with the problem of the closed

[12] Laclau in Žižek 2002, p. 205.
[13] See Žižek 1999, pp. 153–4.
[14] See Žižek 2002, pp. 219–23, 254–5.

circuit. But note what has happened here: the Real is capitalism. Even in the very discussion of Lacan, Žižek's second and preferred option for dealing with the problem of both Butler and Laclau shows itself, namely the juxtaposition of Marx and Lacan.

But Žižek will need to do more than throw Lacan and Marx together; rather than Lacan turning out to be a Marxist, or indeed Marx a Lacanian *avant la lettre*, some mediation between them will need to come into play. In response to Laclau's criticism that he is insufficiently aware of the Marxist tradition, Žižek will become a Leninist. But, as I have suggested, the step to Lenin, which is, at the same time, the necessary mediation between Lacan and Marx, is Alain Badiou's reading of Paul. Although Žižek relies on Badiou in his post-'conversion' books (*The Fragile Absolute* and *On Belief*), the mediation is already in place by the time of the dialogues, although Žižek does not utilise it at that point. I refer, of course, to the introduction of Badiou's Paul in *The Ticklish Subject*.

Of truth-events and sundry matters: the challenge of Badiou

Žižek needs Christianity, or more specifically Paul and the New Testament to crack the shell of Lacan. And Badiou gives him the strength to so do. Although he refers to Badiou at various points in his earlier works,[15] only with *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek's first effort at a militantly political book,[16] does Badiou come to the fore. In Žižek's search for the 'unacknowledged kernel'[17] of the Cartesian *cogito* in the book as a whole, Badiou becomes the prime exhibit of the post-Althusserians, those who developed their theories of the subject by touching base with Althusser but then moving on. But what happens here – and this is crucial – is that Žižek will still try to absorb Badiou into Lacan, and when he will not fit, then Lacan will do Badiou one better. Žižek needs to do this, for now at least, since the problem Badiou raises is whether 'psychoanalysis is not able to provide the foundation of a new political practice'.[18]

---

[15] Žižek 1991, pp. 188, 270; Žižek 1997, pp. 26, 59, 92; Žižek 1993, p. 4.

[16] 'While this book is philosophical in its basic tenor, it is first and foremost an engaged political intervention, addressing the burning question of how we are to reformulate a leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement, liberal-democratic multiculturalism' (Žižek 1999, p. 4).

[17] Žižek 1999, p. 2.

[18] Žižek 1999, p. 3.

In other words, in Žižek's eyes, Badiou challenges him directly with the problem raised by Butler, namely whether psychoanalysis remains within the confines of that which is, the normal functioning of things, and cannot provide any possibility of the New. This is how Žižek formulates the challenge:

> [F]or Badiou, what psychoanalysis provides is insight into the morbid intertwining of Life and Death, of Law and desire, an insight into the obscenity of the Law itself as the 'truth' of the thought and moral stance that limit themselves to the Order of Being and its discriminatory Laws; as such, psychoanalysis cannot properly render thematic the domain beyond the Law, that is the mode of operation of fidelity to the Truth-Event – the psychoanalytic subject is the divided subject of the (symbolic) Law, *not* the subject divided between Law (which regulates the Order of Being) and Love (as fidelity to the Truth-Event).[19]

Now, such a quotation risks fading into the mists of obscurity, for it relies upon a whole panoply of Badiou's philosophical and theological terminology, but it is useful both as the recognition by Žižek of the fundamental challenge to any Lacanian politics and as a summary of the terms and categories that are important for Žižek's engagement with Badiou. Even without filling in the content of the various terms in the quotation, the distinctions and relationships between them are quite clear. Distinctions exist between: the order of being and the truth-event; law and love; life and death; law and desire; and the doubly split subject. The order of being is the realm of the law or, rather, the law 'regulates' this order, whereas the truth-event is characterised by love, that which produces fidelity to the truth-event (I will return to this point below, for it is a slight misreading of Badiou). Another term has crept in here, namely trust or fidelity (faith?), but I will put that aside. The order of being is the writhing mass of law and desire, and life and death. These related but different distinctions come out of Badiou's exegesis of Paul's letter to the Romans, especially the seventh chapter. (I will dispense with the quaint 'St.' for Paul that Žižek and Badiou insist on using.) The challenge for Žižek is that psychoanalysis, according to Badiou – and as we saw, Butler as well, although in her own terms – is of the domain of being, of the law

[19] Žižek 1999, p. 162.

and its inextricable relation with desire, life and death. It cannot provide any insight into the 'domain beyond the Law', namely the truth-event, which, for Badiou, is the location of the political act and subject. As for the subject, we have here a double split, one the split subject of psychoanalysis (in Badiou's terms, the subject caught in the tensions of law and desire) and the other the split political subject of Paul's thought, the one caught between the law and love, between being and truth-event.

Let us explore these terms a little further, all the while watching for the way Žižek responds to the challenge from Badiou. The key lies with Badiou's distinction between being and event. Being concerns the 'state of things'. It is the realm of knowledge, of ontology and mathematics proper (Badiou is also a mathematician) and the mathematical problem with which being is concerned is the relationship between the one and the multiple. Being comprises the pure multiple, as well as the endless multitude of everyday experience and the ability to structure, or 'count' that experience as one, in terms of society, culture, politics and so on. Without going into the distinctions between 'situation', the 'state of the situation', 'the state of things', the reduplication of symbolisation that leads both to the void (the realm of the pure multiple before symbolisation) and the two forms of excess, Badiou's notion of being is a complex and detailed way of speaking about the *status quo*.

From the midst of the multiplicity of being bursts forth the event, emerging from another realm entirely. Unforeseen, unpredictable, outside the realm of knowledge, the event is localised, specific and contingent. It comprises the truth for a particular situation (there is only one truth, but it is specific). It can only be seen, from the welter of everyday life and experience, as springing from the void, but, in doing so, it uncovers the excesses and repressions of the situation. The favoured example here is the French Revolution, an event that could not be predicted from the social, political and economic mix of French society, and yet an event that exposed the lie of the *ancien régime*. However, there is no such thing as an event pure and simple, for it needs the perception and symbolisation of those who follow, a naming of the event that constitutes it as an event, a goal, a political operator that takes the form of militant groups, and the subject. The subject is

> the agent who, on behalf of the Truth-Event, intervenes in the historical multiple of the situation and discerns/identifies in it signs-effects of the

> Event. What defines the subject is his *fidelity* to the Event: the subject comes *after* the Event and persists in discerning its traces within his situation.[20]

Paul is this agent, this subject, the one who names the truth-event, for it can be a truth-event only after the fact, after the event has been inscribed into language. For Badiou, Paul provides the primary example of the functioning of the truth-event. Žižek, however, drops one of Badiou's main emphases: Paul is a 'militant figure'[21] who writes occasional pieces, letters, 'militant documents',[22] intervening in debates within the new groups he established. In fact, what attracts Badiou to Paul is not merely that he acts like a militant involved in a militant political group (the early Christians), but that he is the militant *par excellence*, the one who sets the agenda for subsequent members of the group. Given that Žižek is, after all, writing a militant political book, I find it passing strange that he should abandon Paul the militant. Rather, Paul is an interpreter of an enigmatic 'event' that could never have happened. He provides the 'interpreting intervention',[23] the act of one who 'speaks from a subjectively engaged position'.[24] To an external observer, the event remains uncertain, it is not clear that there has been an event at all – the resurrection, of course, provides the best instance – and so the engaged subject, the intervenor, is marked by his fidelity to the event, working tirelessly to discern signs of the event and the persuade others as to its truth. If the event itself is murky to an external observer, then the language of naming and formulating the truth-event is meaningless from the same perspective: Christian theology, with its terminology of the incarnation and resurrection, of the return of Christ and the Last Judgement, of God and His acts in the world, seems no more than the arcane projections of human beings themselves, pointlessly

---

[20] Žižek 1999, p. 130. As Žižek points out on a couple of occasions (Žižek 1999, pp. 141, 143), Badiou's truth-event is 'uncannily close' (Žižek 1999, p. 141) to Althusser's theory of ideological interpellation, particularly the argument that an individual is interpellated into a subject by a 'Cause'. Žižek hints at the link via the religious 'example': just as Althusser uses the example of the Church, so Badiou speaks of Paul. However, as I argued in my chapter on Althusser, the last section of his ideology essay is less an example than the conclusion to his argument. So also, it seems to me, is Badiou's 'example' of Paul the crucial feature of his argument concerning the truth-event.

[21] Badiou 2003, p. 2.

[22] Badiou 2003, p. 31.

[23] Žižek 1999, p. 135.

[24] Ibid.

developing fantasies that relate to no objective reality. But then why do Paul and the other early Christians devote themselves so passionately to such an apparently empty cause?

As Žižek points out, for Badiou, Paul provides not merely the ultimate but the *founding* instance of the truth-event. Yet it is not the content itself – the resurrection – that is the key but the formal conditions of the truth-procedure:

> [w]hat he provides is the first detailed articulation of how fidelity to a Truth-Event operates in its universal dimension: the excessive, *surnuméraire* Real of a Truth-Event ('Resurrection') that emerges by Grace (i.e. cannot be accounted for in the terms of the constituents of the given situation) sets in motion, in the subjects who recognize themselves in its call, the militant 'work of Love', that is, the struggle to disseminate, with persistent fidelity, this Truth in its universal scope, as concerning everyone.[25]

There are two elements of this quotation that will turn out to be crucial in Žižek's search for a materialist concept of grace. First, the form of Paul's articulation of the truth-event is more important than the content. Very early in his book, Badiou makes it clear that he is interested in the formal possibilities, the 'general procedure' of Paul's act and position rather than any fabulous content:

> If there has been an event, and if truth consists in declaring it and then in being faithful to this declaration, two consequences follow. First, since truth is evental, or of the order of what occurs, it is singular.... Second, truth being inscribed on the basis of a declaration that is in essence subjective, no preconstituted subset can support it; nothing communitarian or historically established can lend its substance to the process of truth.... It is offered to all, or addressed to everyone, without a condition of belonging being able to limit this offer, or this address.[26]

Yet, for Badiou, the strength of Paul's central claim – that Jesus is resurrected – is that it is pure fable, that it is not tied to any element of the 'earthly' life of Jesus, or, more generally, any historical conditions or causes. It is not falsifiable or verifiable in terms of the order of fact; that is, it is not even a miracle.

---

[25] Žižek 1999, p. 143.
[26] Badiou 2003, p. 14.

The formal strength of Paul's act allows him to structure a subject 'devoid of identity and suspended to an event whose only "proof" lies precisely in its having been declared by a subject'.[27] In other words, Paul's breakthrough – the contingency and particularity of the universal – lies precisely in the subject without identity (through the event, the resurrection that can be known and named only by a subject) and the law without support (grace).

Here, we come across a curious slippage in Badiou's text. If he does not need a historical Jesus, unlike Eagleton, then he very much wants a historical Paul.[28] The effort to construct something resembling a biography of the militant Paul relies on the six 'authentic' letters (forgetting Philemon in the process, but at the same time eliding the scholarly Paul of the 'authentic' letters and the historical individual himself), apart from the extraordinary exception of the account of Paul's 'conversion' on the road to Damascus in the book of Acts. Indeed, the brackets of his assertion are telling: '(if, as we believe, in this particular instance one can, for once and once only, trust that fabricated biography of Paul that the New Testament presents under the title Acts of the Apostles)'.[29] One cannot help asking why the experience and naming of the truth-event must be wrested from the realm of fable – the 'fabricated biography' of Acts – while the event so named, the resurrection, must by definition remain firmly in that realm.

What of Žižek's response to the resurrection? He is much more embarrassed by the resurrection than Badiou. He needs to banish, as it were, the content in order to allow the form to shine all the more brightly. Žižek speaks of the resurrection in terms of a semblance of a truth-event, one that is not based upon an actual event – it is a fable, a regression into obscurantism to insist on such supernatural miracles. Badiou himself does not speak of it in this way: the resurrection may not be open to scientific verification, but it is, in Paul's articulation, a genuine truth-event that is aeons away from what he calls the pseudo-event. In fact, a little earlier, Žižek follows Badiou rather closely, using the clearest examples of the October Revolution and Nazism to differentiate truth-event and pseudo-event. The difference? The Nazis appeared to change everything so that they could save capitalism, keeping the situation

---

[27] Badiou 2003, p. 5.
[28] See Badiou 2003, pp. 16–30.
[29] Badiou 2003, p. 17.

fundamentally the same, whereas the Russian Revolution undermined and overthrew the foundations of capitalism, putting the lie to the situation in which the revolution arose. The key, then, is the way the event relates to its situation rather than anything inherent to the event itself.

However, when he gets to the resurrection and Paul, Žižek can see nothing but a semblance, a fake. The paradox is, then, that the paradigm of the truth-event should be based upon such a semblance. Žižek pushes Badiou on this question, now comparing the fake of the resurrection with the Nazi 'pseudo-event'. In the same way that Heidegger was seduced by a fake event, so also was Paul. Rather than rendering Badiou's argument meaningless – for him, there is a clear demarcation between a truth-event and a pseudo-event – Žižek suggests that the pseudo-event may point to the actual function of the truth-event. As a purely formal act of decision, the actuality of the event becomes irrelevant: one's faith in the event itself remains, a matter of religious commitment that lies beyond any argument for or against the veracity of the event.

As for the second element of the quotation above from *The Ticklish Subject*, I am intrigued by the parenthetical comment on grace: '(i.e. cannot be accounted for in the terms of the constituents of the given situation)'.[30] I will speak more about grace in the next section, for the main issue in Žižek's effort to develop a distinct political position is the search for a materialist notion of grace. He is, of course, echoing Badiou's language here. Žižek does not write of the entirely undeserved gift of salvation, the irruption of God's love for inexplicable reasons, but of the inability to account for grace in known terms. Now, even at a formal level, this is vital, since it will become the means by which Žižek himself is able to take up a properly political position. What I mean is that Žižek gradually works himself out of the closed circle of psychoanalysis not merely through Badiou and Paul but quite specifically through the theological category of grace. In the same way that grace is inexplicable, entirely from outside the system, so also Žižek will turn to Lenin in order to provide some political bite. This is the content with which he will replace the theological content of grace.

I have, of course, wilfully read Žižek's comment in a particular way, for in his discussion of Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject* he attempts to keep him within his over-arching Lacanianism. However, the parentheses I discussed

[30] Žižek 1999, p. 143.

in the previous paragraph are telling, for they constitute a tear in the fabric that will become all-important. For now, Žižek brings to bear his usual panoply of Lacanian categories, and this parenthetical comment can, of course, be roped into those categories as well. Thus, grace, the truth-event named by Paul, turns out to be 'the intrusion of the traumatic Real that shatters the predominant symbolic texture'.[31] In fact, Paul and Lacan are inseparable in Žižek's discussion, for it is Badiou's challenge to psychoanalysis, via Paul, that Žižek must meet.

Thus far, I have really been concerned with the primary opposition with which I began this section, namely between being and truth-event. What of the other categories, of life and death, law and desire/sin, law and love, and the double split of the subject? Badiou takes these distinctly Pauline categories and structures the realms of being and truth-event in their terms.[32] Thus, death belongs to the order of being, once we understand that death is not biological death but a subjective stance, the way of the 'flesh' that does not know the truth-event of the resurrection of Christ. The subjective stance of life, therefore, is living in light of the truth-event, the life of the 'Spirit' that very much includes ones own body (no Platonic distinctions for Paul). And so we get the wonderful play on these terms in Paul's insistence that one must 'die' to this life, to sin or the life of the 'flesh', in order to gain eternal life and thereby overcome the other, physical, death. This position leads Badiou to dissociate death and resurrection as sharply as Paul separates law and grace. According to Badiou, the Resurrection is the key to Paul's truth-event, so that Christ's death becomes a minor issue, one that merely informs us that God became a human being. There is no necessary connection between Christ's death and resurrection; the Resurrection is the truth-event, the irruption of the new, without any Hegelian mediation of the negative.

The law also, understood by Paul in the full sense of the Torah, the law of the Hebrew Bible, also structures the order of being, the way life operates in its normal, everyday sense. Thus we have a cosmos regulated by laws and knowledge, and society kept together by a web of prohibitions. Žižek insists in *The Ticklish Subject* on setting the law up against love, which then becomes characteristic of the truth-event, or rather, fidelity to it. I am going to come

[31] Žižek 1999, p. 142.
[32] See Badiou 2003, pp. 55–6, 79–84.

back to this in a moment, for it sets him on the way to *The Fragile Absolute* as he conveniently forgets that Paul's primary opposition is between law and grace.

For now, it is the first split of the subject that intrigues me, namely that between law and desire. This split subject is caught in the order of being, the realm of the 'flesh', of law, death and sin. In fact, sin becomes the autonomous life of desire, brought to life by the law. It is also, for Badiou, the point at which psychoanalysis touches Paul most closely[33] and thereby the point where Žižek must answer him. And so we get Romans 7, with its entwinement of law and sin, the subject of the law and his conscious ego, prohibition and desire, the tension of the desires themselves, conscious obedience and unconscious transgression, in short psychoanalytic *jouissance*. Or, as Badiou puts it with regard to Romans 7, 'All of Paul's thinking here points towards a theory of the subjective unconscious, structured through the opposition life/death'.[34] Following Badiou, Žižek puts Romans 7 in the foreground, for it brings out starkly Badiou's objection. I quote it in full:[35]

> What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'. But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart for the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.
>
> Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want,

---

[33] See Badiou 2003, pp. 79–84.

[34] Badiou 2003, p. 80.

[35] Contrary to Žižek, I quote from the Revised Standard Version, since the RSV does not attempt to provide 'inclusive language'. Žižek's preferred New Revised Standard Version obfuscates the bias of New-Testament Koine Greek, particularly with regard to gender.

> but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.
>
> So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7: 7–24)

The anti-dialectical Badiou pushes this text and others to a radical opposition between law and grace, but he must dispense with Paul's comments that the law is holy and good and just and spiritual, and that sin is at fault rather than the law itself (Žižek omits verses 12–14 and 19–24, while Badiou neglects verse 24). However, I am not so much interested in the validity or otherwise of Badiou's exegesis, nor even in offering a detailed exegesis of the text myself (no matter how tempting that may be), but in the challenge it poses to Žižek. This is why I let the quotation run on to the question in verse 24: 'Who will deliver us from this body of death?'

Soon afterwards, Žižek quotes Lacan's gloss on this passage from Romans 7:

> Is the Law the Thing? Certainly not. Yet I can only know of the Thing by means of the Law. In effect, I would not have had the idea to covet it if the Law hadn't said: 'Thou shalt not covet it'. But the Thing finds a way by producing in me all kinds of covetousness thanks to the commandment, for without the Law the Thing is dead. But even without the Law, I was once alive. But when the commandment appeared, the Thing flared up, returned once again, I met my death. And for me, the commandment that was supposed to lead to life turned out to lead to death, for the Thing found a way and thanks to the commandment seduced me; through it I came to desire death.
>
> I believe that for a little while now some of you at least have begun to suspect that it is no longer I who have been speaking. In fact, with one small change, namely, 'Thing' for 'sin', this is the speech of Saint Paul on the subject of the relations between the law and the sin in the Epistle to the Romans, Chapter 7, paragraph 7.…

> The relationship between the Thing and the Law could not be better defined that in these terms.… The dialectical relationship between desire and the Law causes out desire to flare up only in relation to the Law, through which it becomes the desire for death. It is only because of the Law that sin…takes on an excessive, hyperbolic character. Freud's discovery – the ethics of psychoanalysis – does it leave us clinging to that dialectic?[36]

Analogous to the question of Paul – 'Who will deliver us from this body of death?' – Žižek makes much more of Lacan's question: 'Freud's discovery – the ethics of psychoanalysis – does it leave us clinging to that dialectic?' Paul is, of course, much clearer about the answer: as the verses that immediately precede Romans 7: 7 make clear, we must 'die to the law through the body of Christ' so that we 'serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit'.[37] It is none other than Badiou's truth-event, the lightning bolt that breaks up the order of being and scatters the writhing mass of law/desire. In Žižek's terms, this is where the second division of the subject comes to the fore, for the first split subject, the one torn between desire and its prohibition, is actually part of the way of death, flesh and the law. The more fundamental division now comes into play as the way of life, spirit and love overcomes the former. Or, in Badiouese, the defining split is between being and the truth-event itself.

But what of Lacan? How does he answer his own question, which might be paraphrased as 'is there an end to psychoanalysis?' Before we turn to Žižek's response, let me point out Badiou's own comment that Žižek seems to neglect. Writing of Paul's insistence that the Christ-event brings the believer to the moment of weakness, the identification as the 'refuse' or 'offscouring' of the world (Badiou quotes 1 Corinthians 4: 13), he then turns to Lacan:

> One will note consonance with certain Lacanian themes concerning the ethics of the analyst: at the end of the treatment, the latter must, similarly, consent to occupy the position of refuse so that the analysand may endure some encounter with his or her real.[38]

---

[36] Lacan 1992, see Žižek 1999, pp. 152–3.
[37] Romans 7: 4–6.
[38] Badiou 2003, p. 56.

For Badiou's Paul, that 'Real' is the object of Christian discourse, namely the pure event itself, that which has no grounding in any known system. In other words, the resurrection is the Real because it is not real: it is mere fable.[39]

However close this might be to Lacan, for Žižek, it is all too positive (he will charge Badiou with both Platonism and Kantianism). The fundamental difference is that, for Badiou, this 'Real' breaks down all that has gone before (being) and constitutes a radically new subjectivity. For Žižek, however, the Real is that which simultaneously threatens and sustains both the order of being (or the symbolic) *and* anything new that might arise. Badiou's truth-event will fall foul of the Real; it will simply not be able to break free.

Let me return to the question of the end of psychoanalysis in order to explicate Žižek's response more fully: his 'aye' to the possibility of the end of psychoanalysis is less than confident, a little too close to a 'nay'. At first he brings forth the ethical maxim 'ne pas céder sur son désir', do not give up on your desire, although he needs to redefine desire here not as transgressive desire generated by the law, as the desire that generates *jouissance* but as the ethical duty to be faithful to desire itself. Not so happy with such an answer, he passes quickly to the next, which is that psychoanalysis ultimately seeks to wipe the slate clean, to confront a void, a moment of negativity that both opens up the possibility of something radically new (the 'Cause' or the 'Truth-Event') and yet holds a question mark over it. The crucial moment for Lacan is, therefore, death:

> what 'Death' stands for at its most radical is not merely the passing of earthly life, but the 'night of the world', the self-withdrawal, the absolute contraction of subjectivity, the severing of links with 'reality'.[40]

In psychoanalytic terms, the zone beyond the mess of law and desire is the death drive. In his perpetual effort to explicate a particular point of Lacan, Žižek stacks one description on top of another. The death drive functions beyond the *status quo*; it is the necessary obverse of any truth-event, the Void that is much more fundamental than that truth-event: 'the uncanny domain beyond the Order of Being is what he calls the domain "between the two deaths", the pre-ontological domain of monstrous spectral apparitions, the

---

[39] Badiou 2003, p. 58.
[40] Žižek 1999, p. 154.

domain that is "immortal"'.[41] For Lacan, this is the *lamella*, the amoeba-like libido, immortal, irrepressible, indestructible, a living 'organ' that does not exist.[42] Lacan is a little more flippant than Žižek who wants to dig into the horrible rotting heap that constitutes the end of psychoanalysis, the break from what Badiou calls the order of being. Like Eagleton, Žižek throws out terms and phrases in order to gain yet another angle on this disgusting clot that seems to clog any possibility of Badiou's truth-event: indivisible remainder, little piece of the Real, surplus enjoyment, scum of humanity, the excrement that fell out of God's anus (this is 'man' according to Martin Luther), or, more bluntly, and in an echo of Eagleton, a 'mere piece of shit'.[43]

Unlike Eagleton, or indeed Badiou and Butler, Žižek would like to take his stand with psychoanalysis, at this point at least, and so he edges ever closer to what I will discuss in more detail in the next section, namely the constitutive exception. If he has been skirting this leitmotiv of his work with the void that is the end of psychoanalysis, the break out of the vicious circle of law and desire, with perhaps an occasional hint (the void always hangs over any new beginning, any cause or truth-event), it rings out clearly when he gets to the subject. For Badiou, Paul is the political subject *par excellence*, the agent who names the truth-event and constitutes a group of followers marked by their fidelity to the truth-event. For Žižek, however, the subject is constituted by a double-bind: the effort to fill the ontological gap sustains that very gap:

> 'Subjectivity' is a name for this irreducible circularity, for a power which does not fight an external resisting force (say, the inertia of the given substantial order), but an obstacle that is absolutely inherent, which ultimately 'is' the subject itself.[44]

In the end, Žižek opts for a thoroughly dialectical position: no truth-event without its obscene obverse, no subject without the gap that the subject sustains in the very act of attempting to overcome it, and, Butler would argue, no historical and progressive political act without the ahistorical bar that destabilises it. For Badiou, this is a betrayal of the truth-event, an infidelity that denies the contingent emergence of the subject through the truth-event.

---

[41] Ibid.
[42] Lacan 1994.
[43] Žižek 1999, p. 157.
[44] Žižek 1999, p. 159.

The upshot of all this, particularly on the political register at which Žižek is operating, is a negative one. Suspicious of Badiou's notion of the Platonic truth-event, Žižek offers a warning that drains the enthusiasm of any political movement:

> If there is an ethico-political lesson of psychoanalysis, it consists in the insight into how the great calamities of our century (from the Holocaust to the Stalinist *désastre*) are not the result of our succumbing to the morbid attraction of this Beyond but, on the contrary, the result of our endeavour to avoid confronting it and to impose the direct rule of the Truth and/or Goodness.[45]

In his debates with Butler and Laclau, Žižek perpetually returned to this point, although with myriad variations. More fundamental that any political act, or truth-event, is the yawning void, the moment of radical negativity that destabilises any act. So what is the authentic political act? It is one that engages at the level of the constitutive exception itself. And, for Žižek, this is none other than the Real, and so an authentic act can only be negative, one that is unnameable [*innomable*]. Or, to put it in Badiou's terms, the event itself simultaneously structures the order of 'being' at the same time that it destabilises it. Less the break from being, the event is the traumatic moment that enables being itself. Žižek always risks disappearing into the ether of theory, but the final point is crucial for the next step of Žižek's search for a political position.

I cannot help but feel that Žižek is almost at a dead end with the unnameable political act that intervenes in the realm of the Real. I hardly need to point out that he is still locked into the Lacanian universe, which manifests itself in the form of his argument: for any position that someone may put up, there is always a more fundamental element upon which such a position relies. The position in question (here Badiou's) thereby becomes a mode of avoiding or screening what is in effect the constitutive exception. But it does not leave Žižek much room to move in.

What happens next is rather astounding: for all his criticism of Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*, he will follow Badiou into the New Testament in *The Fragile Absolute*. Four things are important in this respect. First, in the dialogues (which, we must remember, follow *The Ticklish Subject*), Judith Butler will

---

[45] Žižek 1999, p. 161.

repeat, in her own fashion, Badiou's criticisms of psychoanalysis on which Žižek focuses and which he feels compelled to answer in such detail. If, in *The Ticklish Subject*, he is much more confident of his answers, by the dialogues the criticisms start to bite. That Laclau should come in and point out his rather unsophisticated Marxism adds sting from another quarter.

Secondly, the crucial question that Žižek has raised again in *The Ticklish Subject*, namely the end of psychoanalysis, will continue to haunt him. In his engagement with Badiou, the issue becomes how one might break out of the order of being, where the interplay of law and desire, prohibition and sin, dominates one's individual and collective life. Over against the truth-event, Žižek stresses the negative, the force of the death drive and so on. In the end, all he can say is that any new political act or movement must remind itself of the morass that the movement itself seeks to obfuscate, the seething underside that will rot the bottom out of the act. *The Fragile Absolute* marks the (mistaken) beginning of a much more positive answer that he is willing to name – Christian love, or *agape*.

Thirdly, I am intrigued by an echo or two of Lacan in Žižek's text. Initially, there is the copied slip from Lacan, with a slight variation. Lacan refers to 'the relations between the law and sin in the Epistle to the Romans, Chapter 7, paragraph 7', whereas Žižek writes of 'probably the (deservedly) most famous passage in his [Paul's] writings, Chapter 7, verse 7, in the Epistle to the Romans'.[46] Lacan might just get away with his 'paragraph 7' but not Žižek with his 'verse 7'. For Žižek in fact quotes verses 7–11 and 15–18 while Lacan glosses verses 7–11. A trifling point, a slip perhaps, a sign of less than a precise reading of the New Testament? I hardly need to point out that in psychoanalysis the error is more significant than the explicit content of the argument, especially when the pupil exacerbates the slip of the master.

But where does such a slip lead? Parapractically, it runs away to a much more substantial misreading of both Paul and Badiou. Thus Lacan writes, 'Saint Paul's Epistle is a work that I recommend to you for your vacation reading; you will find it very good company'.[47] Žižek has, to all appearances, taken Lacan at his word, although now focused on the master: 'everyone who aims at really understanding Lacan's *Écrits* should read the entire text of Romans

[46] Žižek 1999, p. 148.
[47] Lacan 1992, p. 84.

and Corinthians in detail'.[48] I assume he means 1 and 2 Corinthians, both normally regarded in New-Testament scholarship as 'authentic' letters. However, note what has happened: Lacan speaks of Paul, the law and ethics directly in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, not in *Écrits*. The slip concerning paragraph 7 of Romans 7 – aggravated by Žižek – comes from the *Ethics*, as does the warm recommendation from Lacan to read Paul over the holidays. In other words, Paul, especially with his concern over the law, belongs to the domain of ethics. This is an extraordinary move, for Paul is not particularly interested in ethics or, in its more base form, moralising. Surely the issue is grace, not ethics? And yet, the problem for Žižek is that any viable politics seems to require an ethical stand, perhaps even a code of ethics. Back to the slip: Žižek's claim that Romans and Corinthians would help one understand the *Écrits* can now be read as Žižek's own effort to hide the obscene truth of his own position, namely that he will become a Pauline ethicist!

How does such an oxymoron develop in Žižek's work? This brings me to the fourth point. It is telling that when Žižek does finally allow himself a direct political comment in the midst of the heavy theory he speaks of the 'ethico-political lesson of psychoanalysis'.[49] The connection could hardly be closer: politics is ethics in a hyphenated fashion that merges the two zones. He makes a comparable move when he speaks of Badiou's truth-event. Let me quote him first:

> One must thus avoid the pitfalls of the morbid masochist morality that perceives suffering as inherently redeeming: this morality remains within the confines of the law (which demands from us a price for the admission to Eternal Life), and is thus not yet at the level of *the properly Christian notion of Love*.[50]

And then:

> On the other hand, we have the more radical division between this entire domain of the Law/desire, of the prohibition generating its transgression, and *the properly Christian way of Love* which marks a New Beginning, breaking out of the deadlock of Law and its transgressions.[51]

---

[48] Žižek 1999, p. 149.
[49] Žižek 1999, p. 161; see the full sentence quoted above.
[50] Žižek 1999, pp. 146–7; italics mine.
[51] Žižek 1999, p. 151; italics mine.

In both cases, the contrast between being and truth-event becomes one between law and love. If the order of being is the domain of law, then the truth-event and fidelity to it, characterised by Paul and the early Christian communities, belongs to the way of love, or rather 'the properly Christian way of Love [*agape*].' Innocent enough at first sight, but there has been a profound shift from Badiou's emphasis on grace. As Žižek will admit later, the truth-event is but a laicised or materialist version of grace. And yet, in these quotations, the point escapes him, for he replaces grace with love. The shift takes place in this sentence: 'there is another dimension, the dimension of True Life in Love, accessible to all of us through grace'.[52] Unfortunately, for Paul, as for Badiou, love is not the same as grace. Even as *agape*, as 'Christian Love', such love cannot escape the bounds of the law. Love may follow grace, but it is not the same as grace.

The biggest miss, then, of Žižek's discussion of Badiou is grace itself, particularly in light of Badiou's extensive treatment of grace in his Paul book.[53] I will return to these pages in the next section. At this point, in Žižek's engagement with Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*, he is caught up in Badiou's challenge to psychoanalysis. In gathering a psychoanalytic response, Žižek finds that he needs to draw upon the well of Lacanian ethics, even to the point of copying and then expanding the master's errors. And this is the trap, for ethics is hardly the best response to the argument that the law has been overcome by grace. The result: Žižek perpetuates the realm of law with his emphasis on love rather than grace, for love is still an ethical category, one that enjoins appropriate behaviour (so the famous text from 1 Corinthians 13 that Žižek will quote later – 'love is patient, love is kind…'). Lacan's reading of Paul in his *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, as also Žižek's attempt to produce a political position from Lacan, cannot escape the domain of ethics. There Žižek will remain for the duration of *The Fragile Absolute*.

Materialist grace?

Thus far, I have not made much of Žižek's Roman-Catholic side, which we will find in full swing in *The Fragile Absolute*, particularly in light of its ending

[52] Žižek 1999, p. 147.
[53] See Badiou 2003, pp. 63, 66–7, 74–85.

in the cul-de-sac of the ethics of love. *On Belief*, however, throws all of this out of the political window, realising that, in the previous book, he was still locked into the realm of the law. Instead of drawing moral lessons for us from the writings of Paul, Žižek's slogan here may as well be the Reformers' slogan *non sub lege sed sub gratia*, not under the law but under grace. It is as though he has re-enacted the move of the Protestant Reformers from the first book to the second. For *On Belief* is a very Protestant, if not Reformed book, one that runs down the doctrine of grace until it blurts out all of its dirty little secrets – human beings cannot effect salvation on their own, there is no profit whatsoever in good works, and the worst thing you can do is look for a political ethics in theology. *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, by contrast, is a curious amalgam of the positions of the previous two books, revisiting them in many ways. Thus, Žižek immerses himself fully in the question of love in Chapter Four of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* only to shift to the question of grace in the fifth, where we do in fact find the resolution of his long search for a materialist doctrine of grace.

This search is the major question for me. For Žižek, the point to all of this is to find a means to break out of the liberal-capitalist hegemony, as he puts it, a way to cut his way through the absolute ground for any political thought and action, namely capitalism. I have argued above that it is also an effort to extract himself from the political dead-end of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Now that Žižek has strayed – no, boldly stepped – into the domain of dour Protestants, I can engage with him much more closely.

However, Žižek's search for that elusive materialist theory of grace emerges earlier, in the lead-up to his discussion of Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*. Not entirely happy with the results of the search there, missing one of Badiou's great emphases in the same book, waylaid in the ethical byway of *The Fragile Absolute* (2000), he will only find the track again in *On Belief* (2001). But I will backtrack, returning to the pages of *The Ticklish Subject* that precede his reflections on Badiou. Only then will I move on to the two later books, breaking that discussion with a return to Badiou and his discussion of grace.

A glimpse

Žižek begins his search for a materialist theory of grace by attempting to divest grace of its theological content and stressing its purely formal character,

although now in a strictly decisionist or voluntarist sense. It is not the fact that God predestines certain individuals to salvation and others to damnation that is important, but the decision or act itself. Žižek will then attempt to materialise grace in terms of the constitutive exception. Readers of Žižek will be familiar with the endless variations of this idea, usually in terms of the Real, *objet petit a*, and so on.

The problem, at least at this stage, is that I am not sure that it works, since he must understand both the Protestant doctrine of grace and texts from the New Testament at a curious slant. As for the former, he unrolls the standard format of the opposition between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in terms of good works versus predestination, salvation by means of the law or by grace:

> In traditional Catholicism, salvation depends on earthly good deeds; in the logic of Protestant predestination, earthly deeds and fortunes (wealth) are at best an ambiguous *sign* of the fact that the subject is already redeemed through the inscrutable divine act – that is, he is not saved *because* he is rich or did good deeds, he accomplishes good deeds or is rich *because* he is saved.… Crucial here is the shift from act to sign: from the perspective of predestination, a deed becomes a *sign* of the predestined divine decision.[54]

Not particularly nuanced, but it does capture the fundamental difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, at least as that difference came out of the Reformation (Luther's revolt against indulgences, penance and so forth). Roman Catholics will point out that grace is central there too, although mediated necessarily through the Church, and Protestants will point out that predestination by no means exhausts the possibilities of the Reformers's breakthrough. From Arminius through Erasmus to Paul Tillich, Protestants have found predestination unacceptable, for it renders God just a little too arbitrary and allows human beings no scope for the role of free will or, indeed, the possibility of doing anything on their own. And yet, both Luther (in a milder form) and Calvin asserted the centrality of predestination in any theology worthy of the name. I am not sure about Žižek's throwing

[54] Žižek 1999, p. 116.

wealth in along with good deeds as a sign of predestination (I suspect that Weber is responsible for this addition), and I am intrigued by the suggestion that Protestantism, understood particularly in terms of the doctrine of predestination, marks the shift from act to sign. For the Reformers defined grace in terms of predestination and made it the benchmark of Christianity. However, Žižek's description of the transition from act to sign focuses the question of grace on good works, on obeying the law. To put it crudely, once good works shift from being the means of salvation to the fruits of salvation then one constantly seeks such indications that a person is one of the elect.

Yet, I want to pick up the ambiguity of Žižek's 'at best' in the preceding quotation, since it seems to me that we have here the spoor of the central element of the Reformers' theology of grace. For what has left its trace on the way out of Žižek's text is the question of salvation. Rather than worry about the status of good works, or even the paradox of election, if we put salvation to the fore, then there is a more fundamental rearrangement: human beings are not responsible for salvation, God is. For it is by God's inscrutable act that we are saved and not through any act on our part. And, for the Reformers, this is grace: we rely entirely on God; salvation comes from outside the system, outside any life of virtue. This emphasis is crucial if we want to understand Žižek's search for a materialist theory of grace. No longer the rearrangement of works, grace in this light ceases to be the constitutive exception.

Reading backwards in *The Ticklish Subject* from the quotation I made above, we come to the second problem (his interpretation of biblical texts) with his attempt to develop a materialist grace by means of the constitutive exception. What he seeks is a suspension of the ethical, and this is embodied in the supposed words of Jesus that he quotes from Luke's Gospel:[55] 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and his children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14: 26).[56] Žižek's exegesis is intriguing: 'Christ calls on his followers to obey and respect their superiors in accordance with established customs *and* to hate and disobey them, that is, to cut all human links with them'.[57] Intriguing – since the verse from Luke has not so much superiors in mind as the ties of blood, and even these are the most immediate ties, the ones that

[55] Matthew's version is even more radical (Matt 10: 34–9).
[56] Žižek 1999, p. 115.
[57] Ibid.

would much later be classified as the nuclear family. Setting the verse in the context of the immediate pericope in Luke would help as well: after the verse Žižek quotes, we find two examples that focus on the issue of counting the cost of discipleship. Unlike the cautious tower-builder or the judicious king about to go to war against superior forces, a disciple does not weigh up the pros and cons, carefully planning his or her discipleship so that it is workable. The follower of the movement has no concern for making a decision after careful consideration. Luke has Jesus conclude, 'So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14: 33). There is little respect for one's superiors here, unless, of course, we put Jesus in that category, but that is to draw in an element from later theology.

Renouncing all that one has, or losing one's life for Christ's sake is not quite the same as rejecting everything that is most precious to us so that 'later, we get it back, but as an expression of Christ's will, mediated by it'.[58] What do we get back? Established ethical norms or *mores*. Everything is the same, except that now Christ dispenses it to us. In fact, Luke's text provides the workings of Badiou's truth-event, even though Badiou needs Paul to make his argument and Žižek has yet to get to Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*. But Žižek is on the track of the constitutive exception, one that has appeared before on countless occasions in his never-ending monograph.

What Žižek has done here is quite simply to read the New Testament in a Lacanian direction. Later, when he becomes more enamoured with the revolutionary possibilities of Christology and the New Testament, his readings of biblical texts will become either a mix of Lacan and theology, or he will dispense with Lacan entirely and exercise some hitherto unknown theological muscles, however flabby and underused they might be.[59] In other words, for Žižek, the biblical texts and theology operate in a seamless continuum, untroubled by any breaks and ruptures, much more so than Bloch or Benjamin whom I considered some time ago. This is a rather odd thing for Žižek to do, given his own liking for subversive readings, ones that cast a whole new light on a position or an argument. And yet, as my discussion of Žižek's beloved Luke 14: 26 shows, the text and theology – at least Žižek's way of doing

[58] Ibid.

[59] Underused indeed, for his awareness of biblical criticism is at times decidedly flabby: see his discussion of the Song of Songs, where his various points have been well rehearsed in biblical criticism (Žižek 2003, p. 123).

theology – do not necessarily work together. By and large, however, I am more interested in his theological positions *per se*, for which the texts become supports or proof-texts.

So we find that, in order to make his argument for a materialist theory of grace stick, Žižek must read the quotation he takes from Luke in this way: Jesus's call to discipleship is another version of the constitutive exception, the renunciation of the substance of social life – a curious expansion on the ties of kin that only now makes sense – is necessary for that substance to exist as such. One can have family, social order, established customs only by rejecting them, for the exception is that which holds the whole shakey system together. One establishes ethical norms through their rejection. The problem with all of this is that the militant rejection of kin and of oneself in order to be a disciple does not partake of this logic.

This exception will become important as I loop back to the Protestant break. Žižek reads the assertion of grace as a fundamental realignment of good works: the constitutive exception of grace establishes the possibility of good works. In fact, Žižek is reworking the whole Protestant Reformation in a materialist register; the Roman-Catholic default position – that salvation is a reward for good works – misses the point. In this light, grace is that which is outside the system and yet sustains it. Yet his brief dip into the New Testament – a taste of his longer discussion of Badiou to come – hardly sustains his argument, nor indeed does the doctrine of grace. For the Protestant point about grace is that salvation is completely undeserved, not that it provides a realignment of the question of good works. Žižek will come to this Protestant position by the time of *On Belief*. However, by then, he will need to ditch the over-arching framework of psychoanalysis as a formal parallel to the doctrine of grace.

The cul-de-sac of ethics and love

The materialist grace on which Žižek has fixed his political hopes has become somewhat slippery. Let me turn, then, to *The Fragile Absolute*, *On Belief* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. All three books are very similar in structure, giving over roughly the first half or more to an effort to depict the current situation under global capitalism and then the distinctly political option that Christianity provides. Structurally, then, the three books are very similar to Badiou's *Saint Paul*, which addresses the urgent need for a new militant political model. If there is a difference between the three books in the first part, it lies in the

content: *The Fragile Absolute* concerns itself more with an analysis of the political and economic nature of capitalism, whereas *On Belief* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* focus on the ideological and spiritual malaise of late capitalism, all the way from the ideology of the commodity and its empty promise, like the 'Kinder Surprise' egg[60] to the tension between excess and denial in coffee without caffeine, war without casualties and so on.[61]

I do not want to spend too much time on the earlier sections of these books, except to note a profound shift in the way he organises the discussion. The *first* part of both books is heavily Lacanian *and* Marxist. He answers Laclau's charge that he is split schizophrenically between a highly developed Lacanian analysis and an underdeveloped Marxist one not by becoming more Marxist, but in a more creative conjunction of the two. Just like Marx, Lacan's theory provides the best theoretical frame for grasping the totality of capitalism, all the way from the perverse forms of postmodern art to the inexorable and internal operation of global capitalism in which transgression is indispensable for the functioning of capitalism.

In *The Fragile Absolute*, before he gets to his Christian response, Žižek makes one major argument with this Marxist-Lacanian analysis, namely that capitalism is the Real, the constitutive exception *par excellence*. Of course, he first made this point and was castigated for it in the dialogues with Butler and Laclau. The lengthy analysis here (burning up almost one hundred pages of text) functions, in many respects, as a detailed reply to his critics. The Real, then, is the 'inexorable "abstract" spectral logic of Capital',[62] except that now it marks a gap between Capital and the reality of people involved in the processes of production and distribution. If the former simply cannot be represented in any way, except through makeshift terms such as 'Capital', then the latter is everywhere present. And, for Žižek, it is precisely this gap that is the problem: the violence of Capital lies in the abstraction or 'spectrality' of a self-enhancing and self-fecundating Capital, one that pursues profit with a sheer disregard for the people involved. Unable to represent it in any adequate form, we can at least speak of capitalism's victims.[63]

---

[60] See Žižek 2003, pp. 145–55.
[61] See Žižek 2003, pp. 95–7.
[62] Žižek 2000, p. 15.
[63] See Žižek 2000, pp. 54–63.

The question, when he finally gets to the distinct contribution of the Christian legacy in *The Fragile Absolute*, is whether Christianity merely manifests the logic of Lacan's constitutive exception or whether it breaks out of that logic. This is the question he puts to himself, one that he dares raise only late: 'Or does it [Christianity] endeavour to break out of the very vicious cycle of Law/sin?'[64] Again: 'Or does Christianity, on the contrary, endeavour to break the very vicious cycle of prohibition that generates the desire to transgress it, the cycle described by Saint Paul in Romans 7:7?'.[65] And again:

> However, this superego dialectic of the transgressive desire engendering guilt is *not* the ultimate horizon of Christianity: as Saint Paul makes clear, the Christian stance, at its most radical, involves precisely the suspension of the vicious cycle of Law and its transgressive desire. How are we to resolve this deadlock?[66]

This 'vicious cycle' is, of course, quite familiar from Žižek's engagement with Badiou. It is also a shorthand way of referring to the lengthy discussion of capitalism that precedes this question. But I cannot get over the incessant repetition. The same questions in exactly the same terms recur again and again, until we get this rush:

> What if the split between the symbolic Law and the obscene shadowy supplement of excessive violence that sustains it is *not* the ultimate horizon of our experience? What if this entanglement of Law and its spectral double is precisely what, in the famous passage from Romans 7:7, Saint Paul denounces as that which the intervention of the Christian *agape* (love as charity) enables us to leave behind? What if the Pauline *agape*, the move beyond the mutual implication of Law and sin, is *not* the step towards the full symbolic integration of the particularity of Sin into the universal domain of the Law, but its exact opposite, the unheard-of gesture of leaving behind the domain of the Law itself, of 'dying to the Law', as Saint Paul put it (Romans 7:5)? In other words, what if the Christian wager is *not* Redemption in the sense of the possibility for the domain of the universal Law retroactively to 'sublate' – integrate, pacify, erase – its traumatic origins, but something

[64] Žižek 2000, p. 113.
[65] Žižek 2000, p. 135.
[66] Žižek 2000, p. 143.

> radically different, the cut into the Gordian knot of the vicious cycle of Law and its founding Transgression?[67]

Žižek faces his own trauma – hence the delay and then incessant repetition of questions – of the limits of psychoanalysis. Behind each question lie the figures of Badiou, Butler and Laclau. Each time Žižek asks whether this is the ultimate horizon, whether it is possible to leave behind the domain of the law, whether there is a 'cut into the Gordian knot', whether we can break out of the vicious cycle of law and transgressive desire. Similarly, as *The Fragile Absolute* draws to a close, we get a run of examples, all the way from Stephen King's 'Rita Hayworth and the *Shawshank Redemption*' to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and back again. Even Christ's crucifixion joins the list, an ominously endless repetitive list of examples of breaking out from the trap of the law. And yet, repetition is the sign of a *failed* effort to deal with trauma. How does Žižek fail in *The Fragile Absolute*? A rift opens up between the Lacanian framework that he cannot leave behind and the notion of *agape*. But Žižek refuses to see the rift, or in psychoanalytic terms, the Void that opens up.

For what Žižek does in *The Fragile Absolute* is haul in love to do the hard work of grace. Thus, love apparently empowers him to break with the constitutive exception, to face the obscene supplement and stare it down, and it allows him to hang on to Lacan and not dump him on a quiet country road. All you need is love, seemingly. But love is not grace – even though we might want to argue for a gracious love, a love that sides with grace – and so it gets Žižek nowhere near the break he seeks, from Lacan and/or from the constitutive exception. But let us look more closely at how this happens in *The Fragile Absolute*, for the specific reason of identifying it as something to avoid.

To begin with, Žižek offers exegeses of two biblical texts, the first Luke 14: 26 and the second 1 Corinthians 13. The text from Luke is, of course, the same one that Žižek called on in *The Ticklish Subject*.[68] At that moment, he read Jesus's call to discipleship in terms of the constitutive exception: one must renounce everything for the sake of Christ in order to get it back. Or, rather, the necessary condition for social life itself – family, social order, established customs, in short the whole panoply of a Christian society – is its renunciation, which is then the exception that holds everything together. It seems as

---

[67] Žižek 2000, pp. 99–100; italics in original.
[68] Žižek 1999, p. 115, see above.

though Žižek has taken to heart my criticisms of this reading, purely in terms of the context in Luke's Gospel, for, by now, Luke 14: 26 is not the constitutive exception of the social order but the very means of breaking from it: 'it is love itself that enjoins us to "unplug" from the organic community into which we were born'.[69] In a pattern that has become thoroughly familiar, Žižek throws together a whole series of variations on this unplugging, uncoupling, or as he will call it in the final section, the 'breakout': the Buddha, Christianity and Kierkegaard join the Jesus of Luke's Gospel who speaks not about 'hatred' – 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother…' (Luke 14: 26) – but the love of both Galatians 3: 28 and of 1 Corinthians 13.

As for 1 Corinthians 13, he will throw it in with Romans 7, so much so that the message of Romans 7 *is* that of 1 Corinthians 13. In the quotation above, Paul already speaks of *agape* in Romans, at least for Žižek. Of course, Paul does not mention love at all in Romans 7: 7 (that Lacanian error once again), let alone in the verses surrounding it in Chapter 7 as a whole. By contrast, 1 Corinthians 13 does speak of love:[70] Žižek claims that it is Paul's other paradigmatic passage, one that should be read dialectically with Romans 7. In other words, love (1 Corinthians 13) enables the breakout from the entanglement of law and transgression that Paul maps in the Romans text. Love is quite simply of another order, one that does not compute in the cycle of law and sin. Žižek's argument can only appear to work if he casts 1 Corinthians 13 in with Romans 7.

Yet, Žižek seems to have forgotten Badiou's argument that love is fidelity to the event and not the fundamental nature of the event itself. For some strange reason, *agape* has replaced grace. Thus, at one of the few moments when he refers to a theologian apart from Kierkegaard, he confuses grace with love. He quotes Rudolph Bultmann on the opposition of grace and law only to comment that Lutheran theologians like Bultmann are among the strongest proponents of 'this radical opposition between the law and divine love'.[71] The problem is that Bultmann is speaking of grace, not love, a word he mentions not once.[72] But Žižek likes tossing everything into the pot and Badiou's finely

---

[69] Žižek 2000, p. 121.
[70] See Žižek 2000, pp. 145–6; Žižek 2003, pp. 114–15.
[71] Žižek 2003, p. 118.
[72] Here is the quotation from Bultmann: 'the way of the works of the Law and the way of grace and faith are mutually exclusive opposites.… Man's effort to achieve

wrought distinctions between Paul and the Christ of the Gospels fade away. Christ's message, which now loses the mediation of the Gospel writers themselves, is that of Paul.

Love has become the disguise for grace – a touch of makeup, café couture replacing wilderness gear – so much so that it gives the impression that Žižek has found the way to break with the law. But, as he crawls through the fence and makes a dash for the final perimeter, he finds that he is lugging Lacan along with him. He will not make it this time, for Lacan will trip him up, so Žižek finally gives in and makes the extraordinary claim that 'love' in Lacan's Seminar XX is, in fact, Christian love.[73] He will justify this on two related lines. The first is to argue that Lacan undermines the big Other in his later work, so that, by the time he gets to the almost dementia-ridden Seminar XX, there is no guarantee for the consistency of the symbolic space in which we dwell. In other words, the fundamental unbalancing of Christian love, its threat to cosmic order is the point at which it starts to look the same as Lacan's notion of love.

But this notion of love as disruption is not quite the break from the cycle of law and desire, so Žižek makes a move that signals the complete breakdown of his focus on love. In the final section of *The Fragile Absolute*, 'The Breakout', as well as the last pages of the fourth chapter of *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, he suggests that the Christian notion of love may be understood in terms of Lacan's feminine formulae of sexuation. While the masculine is the domain of the constitutive exception, the realm in which the law-transgression relationship involves a tension between the universal law and its transgressive exception (the latter thereby constituting the former), the feminine is outside this logic. The feminine involves a paradox of the non-All, the non-universal. Let me return to the exegesis of 1 Corinthians 13 I mentioned a little earlier,[74] which Žižek reads in terms of the paradox of completion and incompletion. First, Paul argues that although one might have the gifts of the spirit (tongues and prophecy), all knowledge and the understanding of mysteries, even all

---

his salvation by keeping the Law only leads him into sin, indeed this effort itself in the end is already sin.… The Law brings to light that man is sinful, whether it be that his sinful desire leads him to transgression of the Law or that that desire disguises itself in zeal for keeping the Law' (Bultmann 1952).

[73] Žižek 2000, p. 118; see Žižek 2003, p. 116.

[74] Žižek 2000, pp. 145–7; see the repeat of the same passage and exegesis in Žižek 2003, pp. 114–16.

faith *and* the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom, if one does not have love one is and/or gains nothing. Secondly, all of these items are incomplete until that eschatological moment of completion, of seeing 'face to face'. In the midst of this radical contingency, love is the greatest of the three, faith, hope and love, but only until the mirror clears at the Eschaton itself. This paradox of (in)completion makes sense, Žizek argues, only in terms of the feminine formulae of sexuation. Love is therefore 'not an exception to the All of knowledge, but precisely that "nothing" which makes even the complete series/field of knowledge incomplete'.[75] Love cannot complete the series – gifts of the spirit, knowledge, understanding, faith and martyrdom – for each of the series is already complete. Rather, love shows them all to be nothing, but now a nothing aware of its own lack. And so, concludes Žižek, only an incomplete, vulnerable and lacking being can love. Yet, this incompletion is, in fact, higher than completion and so love is therefore higher, because incomplete, than any complete series. This paradox of the non-all, between the nothingness of completion and the necessary imperfection of love, is what Žižek claims to be characteristic of both the feminine formulae of sexuation and Paul's excursus on love in 1 Corinthians 13.

What we find, then, is that Žižek attempts to hold two positions together: love enables us the break out of the cycle of law and desire because it seeks to usurp grace; love breaks the law only by means of the feminine formulae of sexuation. But this second position is none other than the one with which he finished his discussion of Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*, where he argued that the point of breakage is in following the law to the letter so that it collapses under its own weight. In other words, love is no different to the law (hence Paul's statements in the New Testament concerning the fulfilment of the law). At this point he is absolutely correct, but in a different sense: love is still caught within the realm of the law. But this is hardly the operation of grace, for grace is the radically external interruption into the realm of law, not one that arises from within. If we follow Žižek, we are left with the paradoxical conclusion, following on from the two statements above, that although the feminine formula of sexuation and grace are both forms of love, they are not the same as each other.

---

[75] Žižek 2000, p. 146; Žižek 2003, p. 115.

The problem, as I have been arguing, is that love is not grace, but that Žižek's problem is that he attempts to substitute love for grace. Not only does love enable him to dispense with the constitutive exception; it is also the very means by which this 'spectral obscene supplement' can be suspended.[76] Yet I have argued that this is a failed effort: he attempts to break from this fundamental category that has been present in all his work while dragging Lacan along with him. Almost desperately he wishes to escape, as the focus on Stephen King's 'Rita Hayworth and the *Shawshank Redemption*', a story of escape from prison, in the last section of *The Fragile Absolute* shows. But love cannot do this work of grace, and so his focus on love becomes the sign of this failure. Before he knows it he slips into the realm of ethics and the law, precisely that zone he attempts to escape by means of love. In fact, Žižek is much more comfortable writing about the superego cycle of law and transgression, readily slipping back into it at any opportunity that presents itself.

The most telling mark of such a Roman-Catholic regression comes when he revisits his response to Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject*. The uncoupling from the law that Žižek sees in love is, he argues, the same as Paul's argument from 2 Corinthians 5: 16–17: being 'in Christ' brings about a thorough realignment, a 'new creation' in which 'everything old has passed away'. For Žižek this is none other than the death drive, the moment of sublimation in which one wipes the slate clean in a moment of terrifying violence in order to make a radically new beginning.[77] Whereas, in *The Ticklish Subject*, the death drive places an everlasting question mark over any new start, questioning Badiou's emphasis on grace, here it becomes a characteristic of love as uncoupling.

We cannot have it both ways. In the end, Žižek's problem is not merely that he substitutes love for grace, but that he aligns love with ethics (i.e., the law). In fact I cannot help wondering whether love gets us anywhere. With all this talk of ethics and love, with philosophy undergoing a recovery of its own ethical task and slender volumes on the question of love appearing on bookshelves, it is perhaps time to take a stand against ethics and against love. And one should take that stand in the name of grace.

---

[76] Žižek 2000, p. 130.
[77] Žižek 2000, p. 127.

The Protestant turn

Finally, after too many byways Žižek almost stumbles upon grace. Even though he marks it in passing at certain points, by the time he gets to the end of his discussion of Badiou in *The Ticklish Subject* he has all but forgotten grace, switching for the much more acceptable – at least in Lacan's terms – notion of Christian love. As I pointed out at the close of the previous section, this will lead him into the very Roman-Catholic emphasis of *The Fragile Absolute*. In *On Belief*, he inches closer to the Reformers, but not before he slips back into love-as-ethics before the encore of *The Puppet and the Dwarf*.

However, before I dive into *On Belief*, let me return to Badiou. I do this in part to show how much Žižek missed in his earlier reading of Badiou, but also to show how much he needs it for *On Belief*. Badiou states with the Reformers's starkness the extraordinary logic and appeal of their position. At times, I could shake Žižek for the mad rush of thought and writing that wears away the clarity and sharpness of Badiou's arguments.

Badiou, or militant gratuitousness

Not one for looping sentences, Badiou writes:

> The pure event is reducible to this: Jesus died on the cross and resurrected. This event is 'grace' (*kharis*). Thus, it is neither a bequest, nor a tradition, nor a teaching. It is supernumerary to all this and presents itself as pure givenness.[78]

The contrast here is with the Gospels, written *after* Paul and overloaded with stories of Jesus's life, teaching, miracles and so forth. Paul will have nothing of this. For Badiou, the key text is Romans 6: 14, the Reformers's slogan: 'since you are not under law, but under grace'. If the 'not' signals the breakdown of the closed circuit of the law and the path of the flesh, then the 'but' indicates the suspension of the law and the faithful labour of those opened up as subjects by the event, by grace. This 'not…but' is the mark of the rupture of the event. And, for Badiou, this is also the formal sign of the universal: 'We shall maintain, in effect, that an evental rupture always constitutes its subject in

[78] Badiou 2003, p. 63.

the divided form of a "not…but," and that *it is precisely this form that bears the universal*'.[79] In other words, in its very particular and contingent break with the order of being, grace marks the emergence of the universal – a Reformed philosophy that would put Kierkegaard to shame.

But how is the resurrection of Jesus grace? As I pointed out earlier, Badiou takes the resurrection, the content of Paul's proclamation, as a 'mythological core' and a 'religious confinement.'[80] Badiou 'cares nothing for the Good News' he declares, 'or the cult dedicated to him'.[81] Yet, the fact that it is a fable, that it cannot be verified according to any of the canons of scientific or historical enquiry, is both crucial to Badiou's argument (the truth-event is beyond such verification) and makes it so much easier to identify the form of Paul's argument.[82] Badiou's concern lies with the notion of grace in a purely materialist register. Or, in Badiou's words, he seeks to 'extract a formal, wholly secularised conception of grace'.[83] Later he will variously name this a laicised or materialist grace, or the truth-event.

But now comes the crunch: 'Everything', he writes, 'hinges on knowing whether an ordinary existence, breaking with time's cruel routine, encounters the material chance of serving a truth, thereby becoming, through subjective division and beyond the human animal's survival imperatives, an immortal'.[84] This is an extraordinary sentence, fundamental to Badiou's whole argument, and I will pause a moment to exegete it. The key items will turn out to be its democratic and contingent nature, but, above all, the urgent need to tear grace from its theological content and context. Thus, an underlying democratisation runs through the sentence I have quoted (an 'ordinary existence'), something Badiou draws from Paul's argument that Christ's resurrection enables the resurrection of all human beings (Romans 6: 4–9).[85] It is also very much part of Badiou's emphasis on the contingency and particularity of truth and the universal – hence 'a truth'. So Badiou, a little later, will use the inclusive 'we' and pluralise grace to 'certain graces' of which we are all beneficiaries.[86] This

[79] Badiou 2003, pp. 63–4.
[80] Badiou 2003, p. 66.
[81] Badiou 2003, p. 1.
[82] For a fuller discussion, see Boer 2007.
[83] Badiou 2003, p. 66.
[84] Ibid.
[85] See Badiou 2003, pp. 69–70.
[86] See Badiou 2003, p. 66.

much is fairly obvious, for Badiou stresses it time and again. However, I am more interested in the two metaphors, 'extract' and, more forcefully, 'tear', that precede and follow the sentence I am exegeting. In order to produce such a materialism of grace, Badiou calls upon 'us' to rip, wrench and haul the terminology of grace out from its theological context. The forcefulness of these metaphors seems excessive until we reread the first words of the sentence: 'Everything hinges'. What is this everything? Badiou's whole philosophical system? The validity of the truth-event over against being? Or is it the question of militant politics that hinges on this? All of the above: 'it is incumbent upon us to found a materialism of grace through the strong, simple idea that every existence can one day be seized by what happens to it and subsequently devote itself to that which is valid for all'.[87]

Democratised, contingent, but above all materialist: it seems to me that this notion of grace is the much more fundamental challenge that Badiou poses to Žižek. So let us see what Badiou makes of it. Over the last part of his book on Paul, Badiou systematically reworks the great Pauline triad of faith, hope and love from 1 Corinthians 13: 13 into a programme for militant politics. Žižek will, of course, focus on the question of love, but Badiou rearranges the three. Over against Paul's order – faith, hope, love – we find faith, love and hope in a distinctly temporal order. None of them can work, however, without the underlying notion of grace. As for faith, Badiou picks up Paul's dual opposition between faith/works and grace/law to argue that grace and faith belong to the path of the spirit. But the relationship is closer than that: Badiou draws nigh to the Reformers' position of justification by grace through faith. Or, in Badiou's terms, we have 'the subjectivation of grace's universal address as pure conviction, or faith'.[88] As for love, this becomes fidelity to the truth-event, a post-evental fidelity that produces its own law, the law of the spirit that has nothing to do with the law that the truth-event has overcome. If faith opens up the possibility of a new political movement, then love is absolutely necessary to keep the movement going, a fidelity to the truth that can call other subjects to the cause and thereby universalise. I find it so strange, then, that Žižek makes love bear all of the weight in *The Fragile Absolute*. As for hope, it is quite simply perseverance and patience. Rather than the objective

[87] Badiou 2003, p. 66.
[88] Badiou 2003, p. 75.

judgement that separates believers from unbelievers, Badiou takes hope in Paul subjectively: hope is the result of passing through suffering victoriously, of facing the ordeal and not giving up one's fidelity to the truth. One does not overcome the ordeal in the name of hope, but hope arises by passing through the ordeal. It is 'confidence in the fidelity of the militant'.[89]

I am less taken with the reworking of faith, love and hope, for it seems to me that Badiou has succumbed to the attraction of 1 Corinthians 13. What is important, however, is that he reads this chapter in the light of grace – something that Žižek misses entirely. I am also interested in the mechanism by which Badiou renders grace materialist and militant. It not just that Paul spouted forth a fable with which we can dispense, nor can we remain with the form of Paul's formulation. At some point, Badiou needs to return to content and he does so by systematically squeezing out the theological meaning and finding a materialist and political refill for every term except that of grace itself. Thus, grace remains unchanged, read rather conventionally in terms of pure gift: 'that which occurs without being couched in any predicate, that which is translegal, that which happens to everyone without an assignable reason'.[90] What is due, the wage or reward, is bound to the law and works. He will eventually shift the terminology to that of the subject, since the founding of a subject has nothing to do with what is due to it. That which founds a subject is, in other words, grace: 'Every subject is initiated on the basis of a charisma: every subject is charismatic'.[91] Badiou writes not of the abstract subject: his interest is quite specifically in the militant subject. Militantism cannot be anything but gratuitous, of the realm of grace rather than law.

What of the other term with which grace has an inseparable link, namely universalism? Here, he readily shifts from Paul's assertion of the oneness of God – God is God of the Jews and of the Gentiles (Romans 3: 27–30) – to that of universalism. Once the One becomes 'for all', it ceases to be the One, which is the mark of all that must be avoided. This universalism, Paul's 'revolutionary conviction',[92] is one of excess, a multiplicity that exceeds itself. Not a

---

[89] Badiou 2003, p. 96. Badiou favours Romans 5: 2 here: 'And we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces patience, and patience produces enduring fidelity, and enduring fidelity produces hope, and hope does not disappoint'.

[90] Badiou 2003, pp. 76–7.

[91] Badiou 2003, p. 77.

[92] Badiou 2003, p. 76.

singular universal that can exist only by exclusion, it includes everyone without differences. Paul's key text here is the problematic Galations 2: 16: 'In Christ there is male nor female, neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free'. As superabundant, the universal cannot be separated from grace. So also with love, which is fidelity to the event that makes it available to future subjects; and with hope, the confidence of the militant, each victory is a victory for everyone.

We can now begin to see how Badiou develops his materialism of grace: apart from grace itself, every other term that Paul uses, overloaded as each one is with theological associations, is recharged with philosophical or materialist content. God becomes universalism, love becomes evental fidelity, hope the confidence that arises through ordeal, and law becomes the way things are or being, into which death, sin, desire and the flesh all dissolve.

I do, however, have two questions for Badiou. Firstly, why does one need to get rid of the theological content – Badiou's mythological core, religious confinement or fable – in order to develop a militant politics? Although I can think of a host of historical reasons for a distinctly atheistic and materialist stance in such a politics, I can also think of a range of other militants for whom their militancy was unthinkable without the theological content – Paul, if we agree with Badiou, is, of course, the prime example here. Secondly, and more importantly, both Badiou and Žižek move from theology to militant politics. What happens, however, when we move on to theology from this point, from the full divestment of theological content in a militant politics? Or, to use Adorno's language, Badiou and Žižek have not gone far enough, for if we push further in the direction they are headed we will find ourselves back in the realm of theology. What does this mean for the doctrine of grace? Not only does grace enable Badiou and, finally, Žižek to develop a distinctly militant politics, it also means that grace itself is an inescapably radical and revolutionary *theological* doctrine as well. In this way I read Badiou's 'absolute gratuitousness of militantism'.[93]

[93] Badiou 2003, p. 77.

The grace of V.I. Lenin

Now we can pass, at last, to the substantial argument of *On Belief*. For here, belatedly, Žižek realises the implications of Badiou's laicised grace for a militant politics. And the signal of such a realisation is that only in this book does he become overtly Leninist. But this means that I will need to tighten up my argument concerning Žižek's shift to Leninism: it is not merely Christianity, nor even Paul himself, but quite specifically the Reformed concept of grace that enables him to become a Leninist. So, my discussion zeroes in on those sections of *On Belief* where grace becomes a political category.

Let me identify what he does say:

A. The 'good news' of Christianity involves the possibility of changing eternity, of a thoroughly new beginning;
B. this new beginning is of the same order as Lenin's actual freedom, over against formal freedom;
C. this change involves the suspension and demise of the law;
D. lest the previous point be taken as anti-Jewish, Judaism has a dialectical relation to Christianity;
E. Christology is crucial:
    i. Christ faces up to the constitutive exception and shows it to be empty;
    ii. unlike pagan religions in which one seeks to become more like God, in Christianity God becomes human;
    iii. like the abandoned Christ, at the moment of being completely cut off from God, we are closest to God;
    iv. it shows the fundamental imperfection of God that is the foundation for love beyond mercy.

To my mind, the first two and the fourth points are by far the most important. I am less interested in his efforts to specify the Christian uniqueness over against the various pagan temptations (E.ii). And those arguments that merely revisit rather standard theological positions (E.iii) or reiterate points he has made earlier, concerning both the law (C) and love (E.iv) are not so tempting.

Let me begin with a few comments on Judaism, although the whole discussion of the law in Badiou and Žižek himself is as much about Judaism

as it is about Christianity. The over-riding pattern is to oppose Judaism and Christianity, although not necessarily to the detriment of the former. The contrasts pile up, as usual: iconoclasm versus the renunciation of the beyond; Judaism is, in Hegel's terms, 'in-itself' while Christianity is Judaism 'for itself'; the ban on images over against Jesus Christ; the change in personal identity whereby God or the law move from being external to internal (Christ); the gap between man and God becomes the split, the impotence, within God himself (the step from Job to Christ). For all this, Judaism does not come out of the contrast in all that bad a state. I can sense a sneaking admiration in Žižek's casting of Judaism as another means of overcoming the constitutive exception, although this time in terms of the transgressive act of obeying the law to the letter.[94]

It is almost as though Judaism provides an alternative breakaway from the constitutive exception, the obscene supplement of the law itself, and, in his response to Eric Santner in *The Puppet and Dwarf*, he argues such a line.[95] Except, of course, in the ban on images: Žižek takes this as the mark of anthropomorphism or personification in Judaism. Precisely because Judaism does have a personal deity, because any representation would bring out this unbearable truth, Judaism needs the second commandment against graven images. Here lies the imaginary excess that must be repressed. This excess takes a number of forms: spectral, fantasmic history (Freud's myth of the patricide of Moses is then an effort to expose such a history)[96] over against explicit symbolic history; the secret horror of divine impotence; the abyss of the Other's desire and so on. At this point, Christianity lays the truth bare: Christ is this image, this ordinary creature that Judaism cannot face. Or, as he will argue at greater length in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Christianity shows as empty the fantasmic kernel of Judaism – the Messiah has arrived.[97] And so, in the end, Žižek prefers the Christian version of 'unplugging' in which Christianity faces up to and embraces its own excess. Even though the Jewish version – obeying the law to the letter – looks for all the world like the feminine formulae of sexuation with which he tried to describe the Christian break in *The Fragile Absolute*, he will stay with the elusive search for materialist grace. In fact, what

[94] See Žižek 2001, pp. 110, 127.
[95] See Žižek 2003, pp. 112–13, 117, 119.
[96] Žižek 2001, pp. 129–31; Žižek 2003, p. 128.
[97] See Žižek 2003, pp. 128–30.

happens in *On Belief* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* is that the feminine formulae for sexuation, manifested in obedience to the letter of the law as the ultimate mode of undermining it, moves from Christianity to Judaism. Obedience to the law, the concern with ethics, even (dare I write it?) Lacan himself, become Jewish concerns. Obviously, these options are extremely attractive for Žižek, for they open up the possibility of another path for a new beginning. So much so that, by the time of *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, the split is not between Judaism and Christianity: rather, Judaism and Christianity join forces against pagan initiatory wisdom. The problem with this, however, is that the closer they are to each other, the more Judaism prepares the way for Christianity. Without Judaism first identifying and remaining faithful to the fantasmatic kernel, Christianity would not have been able to identify with it and show it to be empty. Without the Jewish community constituted as an ethnic remainder, Paul would not have been able to claim that the whole of humanity is a remainder. All of which ends up being a renewed form of supersessionism: in part a response to Eric Santner, in part due to the indelible stamp of Judaism on psychoanalysis. I want to suggest however, that the Christian break with Judaism is part of his necessary break with Lacan if he is to develop a political position.

What of the other two points I listed above? How do they explicate a political theology of grace? On the last pages of *On Belief*, Žižek (seems) to come clean:

> Here enters the 'good news' of Christianity: the miracle of faith is that it IS possible to traverse the fantasy, to undo this founding decision, to start one's life all over again, from the zero point – in short, *to change Eternity itself (what we 'always-already' are)*. Ultimately, the 'rebirth' of which Christianity speaks (when one joins the community of believers, one is born again) is the name for such a new beginning.[98]

This passage leans heavily towards theological rather than Lacanian terminology (a little earlier he invokes the term 'miracle', quoting Lenin's 'in some respects, a revolution is a miracle').[99] In fact, the only relic of Lacan lies in the notion of traversing the fantasy, crossing the gap that separates the

[98] Žižek 2001, p. 148; emphasis in original.
[99] Žižek 2001, p. 84.

mundane universe of meaning and its fantasmic support. Christianity dares to bridge this gap, to stare down the horrific and psychotic realm of the living dead that would, under normal Lacanian terms, result from this collapse of the Real (fantasy) and Symbolic (the universe of meaning): Christianity sends this realm scuttling away into a dark corner. Other than that, in these last pages Lacan has quietly slipped out the back. Instead, we find Kierkegaard (and I will need to return to this), Marx, Evelyn Waugh, Brecht, Schelling and Lenin.

Out of these, I am really after Lenin. In order to get to him, I will need to pass by Brecht. Brecht's poem 'The Interrogation of the Good', is translated by Žižek himself. The poem allows Žižek to stress the suspension of the ethical as the absolute basis of any authentic ethical engagement. Now, of course, we threaten to return here to the constitutive exception – the suspension of ethics as the basis of ethics – until we get to this statement:

> And what is the Christian notion of being 'reborn in faith' if not the first full-fledged formulation of such an unconditional subjective engagement on account of which we are ready to suspend the very ethical substance of our being?[100]

This 'unconditional subjective engagement' is of a fundamentally different order than ethics, so much so that it can hardly be called an ethical engagement, let alone ethics as such.

Instead, what we have here is the hard-headed and hard-hearted reality of seizing the revolution and holding to it. In other words, Badiou's militant declarations become, in Brecht's poem, the need to execute the obnoxious 'good man', although now with a good bullet from a good gun up against a good wall. This is, of course, where Žižek's increasing identification as a Leninist begins to have some bite: over against the contemporary elevation of ethics over politics, a return to Lenin rather than a de-politicised Marx places politics, or more directly a 'politics of Truth',[101] at the centre. Further, like Paul with Christianity and Lacan with psychoanalysis, Lenin is outside the initial Marxist circle (he is Eastern, Russian, Tartar), but this externality allows him to wrench Marxism out of its original context and thereby universalise it.[102]

---

[100] Žižek 2001, p. 151.
[101] Žižek 2001, p. 2.
[102] See Žižek 2001, pp. 2–3.

Thirdly, only through such a traumatic displacement can the theory become effective in an explicitly political sense. This is where Lenin's absolute commitment to the revolutionary cause is the key, the profound suspension of ethics in the name of a revolutionary cause to which *everything* must contribute in order to change the 'coordinates of the situation'.[103] The coordinates in question are those of the liberal-capitalist world order. The terminology draws nigh to that which Žižek uses for Christianity at the close of *On Belief* (see above) and to Badiou's event in the midst of being.

A materialist notion of grace is beginning to emerge. But there is one more step, and that comes with the discussion of formal and actual freedom. Quite simply, actual freedom is the ability to step outside or transcend the particular context in question. It questions and overturns the cluster of presuppositions and determinations that constitute in normal circumstances the absolute horizon of thought and action. Formal freedom is then the apparent freedom whose boundaries are in fact set by a certain situation: given the coordinates, the range of choice appears to be endless but is, in fact, limited. It operates within the terms of the existing power relations. Actual freedom, by contrast, is not the choice between two or more options within a given situation, but the choice of changing the very situation itself. My ability to choose from various products in a supermarket is therefore formal freedom: faced with a bewildering array of choices, I fail to see that the political economic structure that generates supermarkets has already set the boundaries of the range of choice itself.

The distinction between actual and formal freedom is an openly Leninist formulation of Badiou's being and event, or Paul's law and grace. Or, in Žizek's own terms, the 'given coordinates' of a situation (being, law or formal freedom) must be opposed to that which overthrows and fundamentally rearranges those coordinates (event, actual freedom and grace). However, Žižek will not let the opposition stand as it is, so he works his way through a thicket of examples from Bill Clinton's failed health-care reform through the French TV show 'It's My Choice' to the 'collapse' of Communism in Eastern Europe in order to argue that in a situation of forced choice (Eastern Europe's option either for capitalism or to return to 'actually existing socialism') actual freedom is the precisely the ability to act as though all options are available,

[103] Žižek 2001, p. 3.

that the choice is in fact not forced. Further, Lenin's insistence on asking whose interest is served by 'freedom' – 'Freedom – yes, but for whom? To do what?'[104] – had the purpose of keeping open the possibility of a real choice, of an actual freedom. Finally, Žižek is inescapably dialectical, and so he will not rest, as does Badiou, with the utter divorce of actual and formal freedom. Rather, actual freedom is what rearranges the coordinates of formal freedom, or, in Badiouese, the event embodies within itself an inscription into the order of being – hence the thoroughly new situation to which the followers remain faithful, living both in terms of fidelity to the event ('love') and with the confidence that they will win through ('hope').

In Lenin's actual freedom, Žižek has finally tracked down that elusive materialist grace for which he set out in *The Ticklish Subject*. And this time, for all of his criticism of Badiou's anti-dialectical stand, he affirms against Badiou's theologically illiterate critics that the event is a laicised grace.[105] Of course, as I discussed in detail a little earlier, Badiou himself says as much more than once.

Before moving on to some reservations concerning Žižek's militant Protestantism, let me note what has happened in the argument of *On Belief*. On a minor level, Žižek has collapsed Badiou's sharp distinction between Paul and Jesus, preferring to speak of Christianity as such. Far more important is the fact that Lenin has replaced Lacan as the primary point of reference. To be sure, there is plenty of Lacan in *On Belief* (can Žižek write in any other fashion?), but, when he gets to the crucial politico-theological points, Christian theological terminology mixes it up with Lenin and Lacan is nowhere to be found. Gone is the trap of ethics to which Lacan kept him tied in *The Fragile Absolute*, gone is the desperate effort to find political mileage in Lacan, or, indeed, to interpret the main points of Christian theology by means of Lacanian categories. In their place, we find a clear focus on grace, and it is Lenin who emerges as the embodiment of a materialist and political grace.

Grace has, however, become a purely formal category, marking the unexpected break that overthrows the *status quo*. The term itself is then translated into Lenin's actual freedom, passing through Badiou's event. But let me pick up the features of grace that I identified a little earlier, especially the con-

---

[104] See Žižek 2001, p. 114.
[105] Žižek 2001, p. 112.

cern with salvation rather than good works or even election. In the Reformed understanding, grace is that which comes from entirely outside human agency, from God to be precise. Human beings neither deserve salvation, nor can they in any way effect salvation for themselves: grace is the undeserved and unearned gift of salvation from God. However, Žižek's Leninist reading hardly has room for God: actual freedom is nothing other than the revolutionary act itself. In other words, human agency returns with a vengeance, and grace becomes an act of human intervention. I want to keep open the possibility that a materialist grace might in fact remove human beings as the agents of change, however difficult such a possibility might be.

Kierkegaard's snare

However, Žižek claims that his is a properly Christian reading, that this Leninist position is one with the revolutionary core of Christianity. But this is not something that Žižek brings about through the force of his own argument. Rather, he brings about the Leninist-Christian conjunction by means of a figure who quietly peers around the corner of some of the major points of his argument, namely Søren Kierkegaard. Now, Kierkegaard will come in for a beating in my discussion of Adorno in the next chapter, but Žižek utters not one word of criticism of Kierkegaard, citing him approvingly when he needs to peg his argument firmly to the ground. Kierkegaard is, of course, the Protestant, or, rather, Lutheran philosopher *par excellence*, and it seems to me that the moment of Žižek's own Reformation relies heavily on Kierkegaard. But Kierkegaard, at least on Žižek's reading, is the one who skews his materialist theology of grace in terms of human agency.

On crucial questions, such as the law and transgression, love, the religious suspension of the ethical, the fundamental Christian break, but, above all, redemption itself, Žižek defers to Kierkegaard. As far as transgression and the law is concerned – the point of Žižek's struggle with Badiou and psychoanalysis – Žižek brings in Kierkegaard to back up an argument he has made before: the most dangerous and subversive act is to follow the law to the letter, to immerse oneself without reservation in the society/institution/relationship/ideological system in question.[106] This assumes a certain distance

[106] See Žižek 2000, pp. 147–8.

between the subject and the system in question, a pause in total identification that is fundamental to the functioning of that system. To close that distance without pause is the act of the prisoner who identifies completely with prison, the soldier who obeys commands to the letter, the citizen of any former East-European Communist country who actually believes that the state is the full realisation of communism, Christ's fulfilment of the law, and most tellingly, the woman who identifies entirely with her lot as a submissive household chattel. Well, the last example is not quite Žižek's, but he does argue that total identification is in fact consonant with the feminine formulae for sexuation, the Jewish form of uncoupling *and* the radical break of Christianity. And yet the last example is that item in the series that Žižek cannot name, the point at which, it seems to me, the argument itself breaks down (I have already indicated my doubts about the constellation of love, ethics and Lacan in *The Fragile Absolute* above).

The way in which Kierkegaard comes in here is telling. Žižek quotes from *Works of Love*: 'We do not laud the son who said "No", but we endeavour to learn from the gospel how dangerous it is to say, "Sir, I will" '.[107] Kierkegaard's comment applies to Matthew 21: 28–31[108] in his own characteristic fashion. Yet the issue is not obedience to the law, to obeying the father's command: rather, Kierkegaard reads this as the call of the gospel itself, the radical demand that requires that one give up everything in order to follow Christ. Even so, there is a catch with this reading, one that gives the human response great scope and one to which I will return below.

At first it will appear odd that Žižek misses the direction of Kierkegaard's reading, for is he not himself interested in the radical break that Christianity provides? But this reference to Kierkegaard comes from *The Fragile Absolute*, which I have already argued slips back into the whole question of the law, in which Lacan and ethics find themselves at home. So also on the question of love: no matter how much Žižek or Kierkegaard emphasises the uniqueness of Christian love, *agape*, the prescriptions on love are inescapably ethical.

---

[107] Kierkegaard 1962, p. 102; Kierkegaard 1995, p. 96; also cited in Žižek 2000, p. 148.

[108] ' "What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, "Son, go and work in the vineyard today". And he answered, "I will not"; but afterward he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, "I go, sir", but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first" ' (Matthew 21: 28–31).

On two other occasions, Žižek cites approvingly Kierkegaard's *Works on Love*. The first comes in a commentary on one of Žižek's favourite texts from Luke 14: 26 – the one concerning hatred of father, mother etc. – to suggest that one should in fact '*hate the beloved* out of love and in love'.[109] This is, in fact, the work of love, comparable to Che Guevara's or Lenin's revolutionary violence.[110] And, a little later, in a discussion wholly indebted to Kierkegaard on love and deception, '*love believes everything – and yet is never to be deceived*'.[111]

Yet, for all his comments on love, sequestered away in his private apartment, Kierkegaard is not so silly as to be trapped in the realm of love. He is, after all, a Protestant. And so Žižek will follow him, now in *On Belief* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, in arguing for the religious suspension of the ethical. Behind Kierkegaard's comments, whose importance is in an inverse relationship to the all too brief citations, lie the three spheres of aesthetics, ethics and religion. As we shall see in the next chapter, there is a distinct hierarchy in which the religious is superior to both the ethical and the aesthetic. Religion, or more particularly Lutheran Protestantism, will then override the other two spheres, suspending them both in the name of the more fundamental category. For Kierkegaard, love may pass through all three spheres, but its truest expression comes with the religious. Or, betrayal may be aesthetic (betrayal of universality for a particular reason) or ethical (betrayal of the particular for a universal such as truth), but the ultimate form is religious betrayal. This is the betrayal out of love, the sacrifice of the other, and thereby of oneself, in order to uncover that element that could only be uncovered by such a betrayal – Christ's mission is of course the greatest example here.[112]

The religious suspension or rupture of ethics is but the first element of Žižek's reliance on Kierkegaard for a formulation of the Christian break.[113] Two other points are important: this fundamental shift in coordinates is one

---

[109] Kierkegaard 1962, p. 114; see also Žižek 2000, p. 126.
[110] Žižek 2003, p. 30; note the difference with his earlier reading.
[111] Kierkegaard 1962, p. 221 (see Žižek 2000, p. 127).
[112] See Žižek 2003, pp. 17 and 18–19.
[113] Back in *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek was already on to the break with ethics, only to lose and then recover that insight. He writes: 'The notion of belief which fits this paradox of authority was elaborated by Kierkegaard; this is why, for him, *religion is eminently modern*: the traditional universe is ethical, while the Religious involves a radical disruption of the Old Ways – true religion is a crazy wager on the Impossible we have to make once we lose support in tradition' (Žižek 1999, p. 115, after quoting Romans 13: 10).

that we are called upon to repeat for ourselves in contrast to the Socratic process of recollection; and redemption is made possible by the break (Christ's death) but is not ensured. On the first point, the new beginning of Christianity is not, suggests Kierkegaard, like Socratic recollection (learning is therefore the process of recovering what we already knew before birth but lost in the trauma of birth itself). Rather, it is a repetition of that primordial choice that was first made in Christianity.[114] The paradox here is that we can make a new beginning yet again without endangering the uniqueness of that first beginning.

However, the most telling debt to Kierkegaard comes with the notion of redemption. Let me quote Žižek in full:

> By taking upon himself all the Sins and then, through his death, paying for them, Christ opens up the way for the redemption of humanity – however, by his death, people are not directly redeemed, but given the POSSIBILITY of redemption, of getting of the excess. This distinction is crucial: Christ does NOT do our work for us, he does not pay our debt, he 'merely' GIVES US A CHANCE – with his death, he asserts OUR freedom and responsibility, for us, to redeem ourselves through the 'leap into faith', i.e. by way of choosing to 'live in Christ' – in *imitatio Christi*, we REPEAT Christ's gesture of freely assuming the excess of Life, instead of projecting/displacing it onto some figure of the Other. (We put 'merely' in quotation marks, because, as was clear to Kierkegaard, the definition of freedom is that possibility is higher than actuality: by giving us a chance to redeem ourselves, Christ does infinitely more than if he were directly to redeem ourselves).[115]

Apart from the shouting capitals (but do not Slovenians always speak over the top of each other?), the famous Kierkegaardian 'leap into faith' finally appears here. Here again, Christianity overcomes the constitutive exception – we appropriate through Christ the excess of life rather than leaving it with another – but, in making this argument, a decisive breach opens up with Reformed theology. In pursuing this break I want to return to a problem with Žižek's reading of Kierkegaard on the two sons. In response to the call of the Gospel, one says 'No' and the other 'I will', but the catch is that it seems to

[114] See Žižek 2001, pp. 148–9.
[115] Žižek 2001, p. 105.

leave the final decision up to the human agents. God offers the call; we have the option of refusing or accepting it, with all the consequences.

The problem, then, is free will and grace. In his famous and vital debates with Erasmus, Luther argued firmly against any notion of free will, which, for him, entailed salvation by merit.[116] Grace was an overwhelmingly alien act of God in Christ for the forgiveness of sins: there was no room for a natural or gradual path to salvation, nor could human beings play any role in the process of redemption. Erasmus was too much of a humanist to give up entirely on human agency or free will. For Luther, however, free will gave final control back to human beings, who could then choose whether to accept salvation or not. Žižek's reading of Kierkegaard pushes him closer to Erasmus than Luther, closer to traditional humanism than the decisive Protestant break. Ultimately, I would suggest, it means that he is unwilling, at least in *On Belief*, to take the step that sees at the heart of the doctrine of grace the removal of human agency.

Revolutionary grace

If I had high hopes for Žižek's resolute focus on grace in *On Belief*, I am finally disappointed. What we find is yet another effort to locate grace in the realm of human effort – yet another form of salvation through works and not through grace. However, just when I had given up hope, the curious mix of *The Puppet and the Dwarf* provides that final step. Here he discards the reliance on human agency: rather than suggesting that any materialisation of grace shifts grace firmly back into the realm of human decision and activity, he finally realises the full implications of the doctrine of grace itself.[117] A materialist grace is nothing other than the unexpected, *messianic* moment of revolution.

Žižek's debts at this point are a mix of Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin and a return to the central argument of Alain Badiou. From Agamben, he draws the point that the reason why Paul is so readable now is because his notion of the end of time only makes sense in light of the revolutionary state of emergency. From Walter Benjamin comes the whole panoply of messianic designation, although in a distinctly loose and Christian sense. And the return

[116] See Luther and Erasmus 1969.
[117] See especially Žižek 2003, pp. 133–8.

of almost pure Badiou is a belated surprise, since Badiou himself argued that the truth-event, in its utter unexpectedness and contingency, is a materialist form of the doctrine of grace.

Žižek's text is saturated with the theological language of grace and predestination (Lacan has again disappeared), but he makes use of it in two ways: one is the unexpected, unpredictable revolutionary moment that comes entirely from outside; the second is the post-revolutionary task, the responsibility for building from the ground up. It seems to me that, for all his byways and choppy arguments, Žižek has hit on something here, namely that one of the most complex ways of speaking about revolution does, in fact, come from theology.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, grace concerns salvation, and this salvation cannot be earned, nor is it deserved. Theologically, of course, the name for such pure externality and contingency is God. Žižek has a good deal to say about God, but he also stresses the analogous impossibility of predicting revolution. We may assess the social and political situation in whatever way we choose in order to understand how a revolution may have taken place, but, ultimately, we cannot answer the questions, why now? Why here? Why these people? Objective analysis will not tell us the time, even in terms of the Marxist crisis of contradictions. The value of speaking about this in theological terms is that it maintains the pure externality of the event.

The doctrine of grace also enables Žižek to wrench himself away from human agency – the point at which he concluded *On Belief*. Grace inverts, or rather undermines, the usual focus on human activity. Rather, the focus is on God. God puts Himself on the line, opening up the New Beginning:

> God took upon Himself the risk of putting everything at stake, of fully 'existentially engaging Himself' by, as it were, stepping into His own picture, becoming part of creation, exposing Himself to the utter contingency of existence.[118]

After such a moment, we must help God, who now stands for the radically unexpected.

So, a materialist grace is external, unexpected and beyond human agency (which is how we then need to understand 'God'). However, the full Protestant

[118] Žižek 2003, p. 136.

turn in Žižek's work comes only with his appropriation of deepest logic of predestination, without which grace could not be thought. It is not just that God predestines things and they turn out so in a quiet, linear progression; rather, predestination relies on the wholly contingent, unexpected role of grace. Once we have had the entirely unexpected and undeserved experience of grace, only then does it appear as fore-ordained. So also the revolution: only after the contingent moment of revolution do the objective conditions show up as leading to it. Further, with predestination, one cannot avoid showing signs of the workings of grace, which will then become apparent in the work necessary for the new post-grace order. So also with revolution: the easy part is the revolution itself; the hard labour comes the morning after when a new society must be constructed from scratch. Or, in Badiouese, the event is pure empty sign, and we have to work to generate its meaning. For Žižek, the truth of predestination lies here, in the expectation and responsibility that follows the event.

Conclusion

In contrast to the other characters I deal with in this book, in Žižek's case I have been on the trail of but one question, the materialist notion of grace: in face of the disconcerting capacity of capitalism to generate and absorb any effort for political emancipation, the only viable political option for the Left – what has usually been termed 'revolution' – lies completely outside the system. As I have pointed out a number of times, the doctrine of grace assumes both the utter futility of human efforts at salvation, usually understood as a reward for good and hard work, and the complete externality of salvation itself. For Badiou, this is the truth-event; for Žižek, it is Lenin's actual freedom, the revolutionary uncoupling that is completely untimely.

On the way to this position, with its various glimpses here and there, Žižek has followed with enthusiasm (does he operate in any other way?) the byways and dead-ends of love-as-ethics and human agency, but he arrives there nonetheless. However, in order to locate that materialist idea of grace, he has had to pass from Lacan to Lenin, via Paul. In other words, one of the most intriguing elements of Žižek's development, particularly in light of his position as the pre-eminent Lacanian cultural critic and philosopher, is that, in order to make this Protestant turn, he must, in the end, step beyond psychoanalysis.

Only then can he become a fully engaged political thinker, that is, a Leninist. Finally, after much hesitation, Žižek faces the reality of this break with Lacan himself. And he does so by raising the question I have raised earlier, namely the end of psychoanalysis. For psychoanalysis,

> the treatment is over when the patient accepts the nonexistence of the big Other. The ideal addressee of our speech, the ideal listener, is the psychoanalyst, the very opposite of the Master-figure that guarantees meaning; what happens at the end of analysis, with the dissolution of transference – that is to say, the fall of the 'subject supposed to know' – is that the patient accepts the absence of such a guarantee. No wonder psychoanalysis subverts the very principle of reimbursement: the price the patient pays for the treatment is, by definition, capricious, 'unjust', with no possible equivalence between it and the services rendered for it.[119]

Contrary to what we might expect in light of the range of Žižek's work, the end of analysis is not the moment of the Christian breakthrough. Rather, the whole logic is different: 'Is not Christianity here, then, *the very opposite of psychoanalysis*? Does it not stand for this logic of reimbursement brought to its extreme: God Himself pays the price for all our sins?'.[120] This is an extraordinary admission from a critic who is now perhaps the greatest proponent of psychoanalysis after Lacan. Christianity simply does not follow the logic of psychoanalysis; it breaks all the rules and thereby enables the breakthrough Žižek so desperately seeks across four books. For, even though Lacanian psychoanalysis is the best way of accounting for our situation within late capitalism, as I pointed out earlier, it cannot provide the means for stepping beyond capitalism.

---

[119] Žižek 2003, pp. 169–170.
[120] Žižek 2003, p. 170; italics mine.

Chapter Eight

Adorno's Vacillation

> Disillusionment at the *false* abolition of something, be it religion, philosophy or art, can induce a reaction in someone that results in vacillation, if not hesitation.[1]

So why would I close this book with Adorno? Partly because these stark and dense texts continue to mesmerise me, the promise of an extraordinary sentence that may well turn up on the next page or in the next paragraph (which is often much longer than a page) keeps me reading and rereading. Partly because he provides the logical, rather than temporary, close to the various positions I have explored in this book. Partly because Adorno teases me, offering a hint, a glimmer of hope in the midst of his perpetual ban on saying anything positive about the future – the occasional phrase or sentence where he drops his guard but for a moment. The main reason, however, is that he produces two of the most astounding arguments in his engagement with theology: the notion of theological suspicion and his resolute criticism of the secularisation of theology that he saw everywhere around him. Indeed, the latter has been the staple of nearly every character I have encountered in this book, along with the contemporary recovery of Paul's political philosophy on the Left. I must also

[1] Habermas 1979, p. 43.

admit to a perverse pleasure in reading Adorno's rigorous texts. In fact, 'rigorous' would have to be the most common adjective used of his work, but it is one that my own Calvinist tradition always insisted was the only way to think and write. Sloppy thinking was to be shunned, the practice of intellectual slobs: if God gave you a reasonably well-oiled mind, then you had better use it to the best of your ability.

However, in keeping with the nature of the rest of this book, I want also to subject Adorno's own engagement with theology and the Bible to critique. For Adorno critics, this engagement is a little like a monolith whose upper reaches are open to the elements and the endless cameras of onlookers, but whose subterranean roots are perhaps known in some way, but best left to the denizens of the underground. Indeed, it is rarely recognised in critical assessments of Adorno that his rigorous philosophical work began in the realm of theology. For it is his study of Kierkegaard, the *Habilitationsschrift* and first philosophical work, that engages directly with one of the most influential – albeit posthumous – philosophical theologians of the early twentieth century. Yet, despite all the work that has been done on Adorno in the areas of sociology, philosophy, music, German, feminism, ecocriticism, literature and cultural studies, few if any have ventured into Adorno's engagement with theology, especially the Kierkegaard book.[2] This is both understandable, given Adorno's subsequent major works, and perplexing, for the absence in critical analysis of this significant dimension of Adorno's work leaves that criticism halting; as Robert Hullot-Kentor points out, 'theology is always moving right under the surface of all of Adorno's writings'.[3] Indeed, his key ideas and motifs were cut and shaped in a profound interaction with theology, specifically the Lutheran theology of Northern Europe. Various deep motifs, especially those of suffer-

---

[2] Hullot-Kentor is an exception, although his comments are too few, offering hints when I want to read more (see his 'Foreword' to his translation of Adorno's *Kierkegaard*, Hullot-Kentor 1989a, and Hullot-Kentor 1992. As a sample of key works that barely mention theology, see Jameson 1990, and Hohendahl 1995). Of lesser note are the works of Jarvis 1998, and Jay 1984. Of the few critics who have considered the Kierkegaard book, theology is not a major issue. I have benefited, however, from consulting Buck-Morss 1977, pp. 114–21, and Max Pensky's discussion in Pensky 1993, pp. 140–9, although both give up the task after only the first part of the book – the discussion of the *intérieur*. Buck-Morss admits that she will not follow the 'full intricacies of Adorno's argument' (Buck-Morss 1977, p. 121).

[3] Hullot-Kentor 1989b, p. xxi.

ing and disaster through which redemption comes, are central to the tradition of the Lutheran 'theology of the cross'.[4] I would add his asceticism and iconoclasm of the ban on images, for here his Jewish and Lutheran strains run along similar lines. But, above all, especially in light of my discussion of Žižek, we find an underlying insistence on the theology of grace, which cannot be dissipated in the hands of the secular theologians: hence his place here, after the Protestant turn.

Not only is the ostensible content theological, but Adorno also wrote the Kierkegaard book under the direction of the theologian Paul Tillich,[5] who later, in 1939, invited Adorno to give a seminar entitled 'Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love'[6] at Union Theological Seminary in New York where Tillich was now professor of systematic theology. That Adorno was to find theology wanting and seriously flawed only makes the confrontation with Kierkegaard far more interesting. In this case, I am less interested in the nature of Kierkegaard's writings than in the way Adorno's own arguments move in the text, what the implications might be for his work in light of this sustained treatment of theology. I am therefore going to assume that the main concern of the book is theology, to which aesthetics then becomes a secondary argument.

I have yet to find someone who will argue that the Kierkegaard book is an easy read, one that you would read to relax your mind in the last minutes of the day before dropping off to sleep. One of his most formidable texts – and in my own perverse way *that* is what I find so attractive about it – it perpetually snares me in the labyrinth of Adorno's dense style. It does not help that the youthful Adorno was showing off his formidable philosophical skills. So, quite deliberately, I will go against the spirit of the work and seek a key to the labyrinth, or, if we are going to stay with the classical allusion, the thread that will lead us out again. And that thread is threefold: I have, in fact, mentioned two already – theological suspicion and the criticism of secularised theology. But the third is a strong desire to stretch Adorno, to push past his self-imposed road block and seek out what the possibilities of theology might be.

---

[4] So Hullot-Kentor 1992, pp. 105–6, although to argue that the idea of history as nature, or the critiques of reification and progress are also Lutheran is too facile.

[5] Tillich also had close connections with Horkheimer and Scholem, and thought very highly of Benjamin. See Scholem 1992, p. 214.

[6] Adorno 1971, Volume 2, pp. 217–36.

Let me say a little more on each before plunging into Adorno's texts. As for theological suspicion, I have, in fact, taken the liberty of coining the term – you will not find Adorno championing the idea. But it is, of course, intimately entwined with that venerable Marxist notion of ideological suspicion, and Adorno is one of its most accomplished practitioners. What is good enough for ideology is good enough for theology, and so I trace the way Adorno carries out a double strategy in his critique of Kierkegaard: he will consistently seek to demythologise Kierkegaard, identifying the mythological underlay of his theology, and then make the move either to history or to the unbearable paradoxes of that system. The particular strategy may change, but theological suspicion must be one of the crucial dimensions of any materialist theology.

Theological suspicion will lead me on to the second element I want to draw from Adorno – the criticism of secularised theology. This may come as a surprise to those who have read at least some of the critical appraisal of Adorno's work, for one of the commonplaces is that he too operates with secularised theological terms such as the Fall, redemption and grace. However, a close look at both *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *The Jargon of Authenticity* makes short work of such a position. Intimately related to criticism of secularised theology is the *Bilderverbot* that he drew from the second commandment in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. I have much to say on the ban on images in this chapter, for it has a direct bearing on the question of the personality cult. So we have a ban on secularised theology that has profound implications for the work of the other Marxists I consider in this book. Apart from Lefebvre, all of them seek to reappropriate theological, biblical and ecclesiological motifs for Marxism, to move from the criticism of theology to the criticism of politics. Adorno can see nothing but misfortune on this path.

Thirdly, for all his efforts to torch Kierkegaard's thought, I track an ambivalence, a vacillation over the question of theology itself. At one level, such an ambivalence appears in the desire for a thoroughly dialectical reading of theology, a search for what he calls the 'truth-content' of theology that arises from the act of theological suspicion. Indeed, his suspicion regarding the possibility of theology to provide any ostensible basis for philosophy generates the motivation for a dialectics that seeks the truth-content of theology beyond itself. This is where the tension between his point to Benjamin, that an immanent dialectical method is able to make the most of theology, comes face to face with his devastating criticism of Kierkegaard. But, at another level, I am

fascinated by the glimpses, the moments in which Adorno lets slip a comment or two where theology has another, more positive role. And, here, I will take Adorno where does not want to go, into the possibilities of theology: my foci are the questions of love (especially from his essay 'Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love') and grace.

Theological suspicion

Sorely tempted as I am to offer a detailed commentary, line by line, of Adorno's study of Kierkegaard, I find myself taking to heart and applying to Adorno himself the warning he issues against being enchanted with Kierkegaard's texts, producing strategies to avoid being mesmerised as I so often am with these extraordinary arguments. For Adorno, fascination 'is the most dangerous power in his work',[7] and that fascination comes from the assumption that Kierkegaard appears just as much a poet and storywriter as a philosophical theologian. Hence the poetic spell of his writings.

How does Adorno resist? Through two approaches – one preliminary, the other forming the methodological underlay on his whole study. To begin with, he sends to the margins Kierkegaard-as-poet: Kierkegaard's own writing is not poetry, not aesthetic in itself, he is not a 'writer' or 'literary aesthete', whether that claim is made somewhat ambivalently by Kierkegaard himself[8] or by others as the key to interpreting his work.[9] Poetry itself becomes the 'stage props' and 'ominous decorations' of the private individual, the 'determination of the poet's comportment'.[10]

But, just when we think that Adorno wants to discard the fancy decorations as so much useless garbage, he brings to bear the second strategy. And that is nothing other than sentence production: *in nuce*, Adorno wants to take Kierkegaard literally, to read his images at face value in order to identify their 'authentic reality'[11] and prevent them, as he puts it, from volatilising into metaphor. Various terms come in to characterise such a strategy – the search

---

[7] Adorno 1989, p. 11; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 19.
[8] See Adorno 1989, pp. 5–6; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, pp. 11–12.
[9] Adorno 1989, pp. 6–10; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, pp. 13–19.
[10] Adorno 1989, pp. 8–9; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 16.
[11] Adorno 1989, p. 13; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 22.

for truth content or concretion[12] – whose ultimate aim is both to uncover the mythical underlay and resist its pull.

Let me take the most direct statement – if that is possible in Adorno – of his method: 'There is no way to meet up with him in the fox kennel of infinitely reflected interiority than to take him at his word; he is to be caught in the traps set by his own hand'.[13] If I tease out this statement, then three elements emerge: infinitely reflected interiority, taking him at his word, and catching him in his own traps. The first will, of course, become a fundamental argument in the book as a whole, namely the radical retreat of the bourgeois private individual. I will return to this below, but, for now, the other two items urge my attention. The second – taking Kierkegaard at his word – is none other than holding his images and metaphors to account, allowing the naked bulb in the ascetic interrogation room to do its work until the images finally divulge the truth. But then I will want to direct the same question to Adorno, for do not his images (they are in fact metaphors) have their own truth content? What if I were to take *him* at his word? The fox kennel and its autonomous traps would speak then not only of Kierkegaard – the radical interior of the bourgeois individual – but also of Adorno, who is inescapably also a bourgeois individual, especially if we follow his line on the closed cage of capitalism. But, much more importantly than this, I want to suggest that Adorno will not let himself say anything positively about theology. This is the trap of his own fox kennel, or, better still, his own fox tunnel: even though he will criticise Kierkegaard over and over for the impossibility of basing a philosophical system in theology, even though he is resolutely opposed to the various patterns of secularising theology, even though he wants to let theology have its head, and even though he lets slip extraordinary glimpses of such a path, he stops short of saying anything more on theology itself. We will see this in a host of theological notions, such as redemption, reconciliation, faith, grace and love.

All we have left are the traps themselves, set by Kierkegaard's own hand. I am going to indulge myself a little here, for the astonishing model for

---

[12] 'Whoever succumbs to it by taking up one of the imposing and inflexible categories he inexhaustibly displays; whoever bows to its grandeur without comparing it with concretion, without ever investigating if it is adequate to concretion, has fallen under its dominion and become the servant of a mythical realm (*mythischen Bereich*)' (Adorno 1989, p. 11; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 19).

[13] Adorno 1989, p. 12; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 21.

Adorno's method is none other than biblical exegesis. He gets to this point by stating that he will use Kierkegaard's own method in order to read his work (an immanent strategy he developed from Benjamin). And Kierkegaard's method is none other than theological exegesis. Here is Adorno:

> The impulse for the literal examination of Kierkegaard's language does not have to be imported psychoanalytically into his work, although there is more than enough occasion and temptation. It has its precedent in the work itself, in the theological Christian exegesis (*christlich-theologische Exegese*). Like the edifying writings, the pseudonymous *Training in Christianity* is exegetical; and all the pseudonymous writings are interwoven with exegetical sections. No meaningful exegesis can be conceived, however, that is not obligatorily bound to the vocabulary of the text.[14]

Here, the attention to a 'literal examination', to 'the vocabulary of the text' – in short, the concern with sentence production, with language and terminology that is so characteristic of Adorno's work after this first text[15] – is to be found in Kierkegaard's own perpetual recourse to biblical exegesis: 'at every point Kierkegaard's statements refer to texts that he held to be holy'.[16] For me, steeped as I am in biblical interpretation and the long traditions of commentary, this is the bread and butter work of literary criticism. Given the emphases of Adorno criticism, especially English-speaking criticism, it is worth emphasising this point, namely that the well-known immanent approach to interpretation begins its long path in Adorno's work with biblical interpretation. By the same token, we cannot dismiss this biblical touch as a temporary phase in Adorno's work, for not only is Adorno's work peppered with biblical allusions that exhibit more than a passing knowledge of the biblical text,[17]

---

[14] Adorno 1989, p. 12; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 21.

[15] See Adorno and Tiedemann 1991, Volume 1, pp. 110–13, 185–99, 263–4; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, pp. 129–31, 216–32, 307–8; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, pp. 193–210, 233–9; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, pp. 536–55, 583–90.

[16] Adorno 1989, p. 12; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 21.

[17] I note, as a sample, the following: 'Indeed, I feel that our theoretical disagreement is not really a discord between us, and that my own task is to hold your arm steady until the Brechtian sun has finally sunk beneath its exotic waters' (Adorno, Lonitz and Benjamin 1999, p. 132; Adorno 1994, p. 175). 'The hack journalist groaning under his editor's demands for continuous brilliance, openly gives voice to the law that lurks tacitly behind all the works on the Cosmogonic Eros and kindred mysteries, the metamorphoses of the gods and the secret of the Gospel according

but he was also to use very similar terms in his famous discussion of the essay.[18]

Yet, in a loop that will bring my indulgence in biblical criticism back to the task at hand, Adorno introduces a variation in his own exegesis of Kierkegaard's texts: 'In contrast to Kierkegaard's exegesis, the exegetical method [*das exegetische Verfahren*] must be concerned primarily with metaphor'.[19] And the reason for such a move is that it uncovers the 'mythical contents [*die mythischen Gehalte*]' of his philosophy, precisely that which the poetic seduction of Kierkegaard's texts seeks to glide over.

I must admit that I am much more willing to be seduced by poetry than Adorno, but what has turned up here is one of the two great underlying motifs of the Kierkegaard study, namely demythologisation. After all, it is not merely the poetic pull of Kierkegaard that he resists at every struggling step, but the fascination of myth itself. This will, in fact, be one of the motifs around which I will gather my discussion of Adorno's theological suspicion; the other two are the recourse to history and paradox. They form, to dip into the metaphor I used earlier, part of the thread that will help me negotiate the forbidding turns of the labyrinth. Succinctly put, time and again, Adorno

---

to St John' (Adorno 1978, pp. 66–7; Adorno 1971, Volume 4, p. 73). 'The existence of bread factories, turning the prayer that we be given our daily bread into a mere metaphor and an avowal of desperation, argues more strongly against the possibility of Christianity than all the enlightened critiques of the life of Jesus' (Adorno 1978, p. 110; Adorno 1971, Volume 4, pp. 122–31). 'Today, when the abandonment of utopia looks as much like its realisation as the Antichrist resembles the paraclete, toad has become a term of abuse among those who are themselves in the depths' (Adorno 1978, p. 114; Adorno 1971, Volume 4, p. 128). 'The mote in his [Veblen's] eye becomes a means of perceiving the bloody traces of injustice even in images of happiness' (Adorno 1981 [1967], p. 79; Adorno 1963, p. 74). 'In jazz, the Philistines standing over Samson are permanently transfigured' (Adorno 1981 [1967], p. 130; Adorno 1963, p. 129). 'Schoenberg's pause in creation, of Biblical length, cannot be adequately explained in terms of his private destiny in the war and inflation' (Adorno 1981 [1967], p. 165; Adorno 1963, p. 167).

[18] 'The essay cunningly anchors itself in texts as though they were simply there and had authority. In this way, without the deception of a first principle, the essay gets a ground, however dubious, under its feet, comparable to theological exegeses of sacred texts in earlier times. Its tendency, however, is the opposite, a critical one: to shatter culture's claims by confronting texts with their own emphatic concept, with the truth that each one intends even if it does not want to intend it, and to move culture to become mindful of its own untruth, of the ideological illusion in which culture reveals its bondage to nature' (Adorno and Tiedemann 1991, p. 20; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 29; italics mine).

[19] Adorno 1989, p. 12; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 21.

levels three charges at Kierkegaard: that his theology slips into the myth it perpetually represses, that it cannot escape the history it perpetually flees, and that the paradoxes of theology eventually break up the possibility of any system based on theological categories. For Adorno, theology turns out to be a treacherous backer, dissolving into mythology at almost every turn, and then rendered nonsensical by internal paradoxes that fail to respond to the dialectic.

Demythologisation

My own encounter with demythologisation is from the work of Rudolph Bultmann,[20] who will come in for a hammering in *The Jargon of Authenticity*. For this New-Testament scholar and theologian, the mythical structure of the New Testament, and thereby of Christianity itself, was hopelessly outdated. Christianity had to wrench itself out of the Hellenistic world – with its three-tiered universe in which Jesus descends from heaven to earth, defeats the devil of the underworld and then returns to heaven above – and remythologise itself with a contemporary world-view.

My question, then, is demythologisation and Kierkegaard. Here, I step out on a path few have trod (the Kierkegaard book), so let me put out front a couple of key issues. Firstly, why is Adorno so adamant that myth is a bane that must be uncovered and countered in whatever way possible? Apart from the obvious point that the Nazi appropriation of myth, in terms of the Blond Beast and of blood and soil, was hardly going to endear myth to a Marxist of Jewish background, there is more to this question. In many respects, we might read demythologisation as an extension of the Marxist programme of ideological suspicion, particularly of emancipatory projects and their unavoidable mythical justification. And then, in the correspondence with Benjamin, he explores what myth that has been thoroughly demythologised might look like.[21] I am keenly interested in the whole problem of myth and, in fact, would like to retrieve myth in some sense, especially in the form of political myth. So I will watch Adorno's strictures closely.

---

[20] See Bultmann 1951; Bultmann 1984.

[21] Adorno, Lonitz and Benjamin 1999, pp. 127–8; Adorno 1994, pp. 168–9.

Secondly, Adorno is famous for refusing to define a term, preferring to let its multifarious senses appear as the discussion proceeds, so I am going to outline the main senses of myth in the Kierkegaard book before I go on.[22] Like a perpetual base riff, myth returns in ever more variations: Nordic myths, propitiatory sacrifice, fate, gnosticism, the Orphic myth of the harmony of the spheres, and, above all, chthonic myths of nature. All of these vitiate Kierkegaard's effort to break out of myth through theology, for theology is unavoidably mythical. Let me summarise: as for Nordic myth, Adorno traces the myth of Odhinn-Wódhan behind Kierkegaard's discussion of the sacrifice of Christ. The god who is consecrated and sacrificed to himself in an autonomous sacrifice, can never be banished from Kierkegaard's Christology. Further, by fixing on the notion of propitiatory atonement (Christ takes the punishment which we deserve for our sins), Kierkegaard slips into a gnostic myth of redemption in which fate dominates: since redemption must entail transcending nature, especially fallen human nature, the only means of doing so is a rescue by spirit (Christ) from a demonised nature. The catch is that the mythical calculus of propitiatory atonement renders meaningless both grace and reconciliation. Finally, Kierkegaard's central notion of the spheres is vitiated by its reliance on Plato's harmony of the spheres, an Orphic moment within a philosophical system.

Nordic myth, propitiatory sacrifice, fate, gnosticism and the myth of the spheres – but I have left out the whole realm of chthonic myth. In fact, nature is a crucial category on its own, zig-zagging its undefined presence throughout this text on Kierkegaard. Again, let me call Adorno to order and list the various senses 'nature' takes: the natural state of human beings, the result of the Fall, that which is not God, the physical realm of nature which is also fallen, and the timelessness and abstractness characteristic of nature. In the Kierkegaard study, nature is primarily an anthropological term, using 'anthropology' in the traditional theological sense, and, in this sense, he can milk it

[22] An explicit statement comes in his more relaxed lectures on metaphysics: 'I believe that while philosophy may well terminate in definitions, it cannot start out from them; and that, in order to understand, to have knowledge of, the content of philosophical concepts themselves – and not simply from the point of view of an external history of ideas or of philosophy – it is necessary to know how concepts have come into being, and what they mean in terms of their origins, their historical dimension' (Adorno 2000, p. 5).

for all its worth. For the theological sense of 'nature' allows Adorno to speak of certain crucial myths of Christianity: the Fall, the death and resurrection of Christ, the two natures of Christ, the second coming. Yet even this does not exhaust the senses Adorno attaches to nature, for not only is it a metaphysical term deriving from Aristotle but also one that invokes the implications of the natural sciences for the understanding of history. Let me turn for a moment to Adorno's essay 'The Idea of Natural History', where this sense of nature is more explicit. In this respect, Benjamin's influence is profound, particularly in terms of the 'natural history' that Benjamin found problematic: arguing against the classical (an account of the inquiry into nature) and the Kantian (nature itself as unending and infinite creation) senses of the term, Adorno proposes a dialectic between nature and history in which nature emerges at the most historical moment and vice versa, a dialectic that comes from the ambiguity of the term itself, whether the history of nature (nature as historical) or natural history (history as natural).[23] Finally, Adorno later invokes nature with a very different agenda in mind: in *Aesthetic Theory*, he attempts to recover the category of natural beauty, over against Hegel, in the context of his analysis of aesthetic modernism. Here, nature becomes the irreducible Other – that which will not be subsumed under an anthropocentrism – within Adorno's non-identitarian theory of knowledge.

The central issues, then, are myth and nature, linked through the underlying rhythm of demythologisation. Adorno's main point, to which he returns repeatedly, is that for all Kierkegaard's efforts to lock myth away in some forgotten corner, it crouches at every doorway, ready to spring back into his carefully structured theological philosophy. Three nodes characterise Adorno's demythologisation – inwardness, sacrifice and the spheres – but, rather than letting Adorno set the agenda, I want to flip these philosophical categories over and take on the theological ideas that lie on the obverse. And so, we have faith (inwardness and history), Christology (sacrifice, redemption and reconciliation) and cosmology (the spheres).

[23] See Adorno 1984.

Faith: inwardness and history

I want to suggest that Adorno's major discussion of inwardness [*Innerlichkeit*] in Kierkegaard's thought[24] is, in fact, a consistent demythologisation of the theological category of faith. It is also one of his best arguments in the book, albeit with two steps, the one concerned with uncovering the mythological motifs that run through Kierkegaard's radical inwardness, and the second with the historical truth content of inwardness.

For Kierkegaard's retreat to an inner intellectual sanctum has a dual purpose – to outsmart the mythological dimensions of Christianity and to find an alternative way to deal with the problem of history and faith. Let me begin with myth: in the pursuit of inwardness, Kierkegaard falls headlong into the realm of spiritualism. Is not spiritualism the favoured form of religious expression of the private individual, especially in our post-secular world where 'spirituality' is everywhere valorised? But spiritualism has an older sense upon which Adorno plays – the realm of séances, communicating with the dead, the occult and so on – and this enables him to point out that the spiritual is also very much the demonic. The Devil is, after all, as much a spirit as God, as indeed are the myriad demons and angels that populate the supersensual world, but as soon as we allow this point we are immediately in the realm of myth. Is not talk of God versus the Devil anything but myth, Kierkegaard's theological protestations notwithstanding?

The trap Kierkegaard has set with his own hand is about to be sprung. But, first, he must arrive breathlessly in the deepest recesses of the tunnel of inwardness only to find that myth awaits him there in the enticing shape of the Devil, and then attempt to escape by making that famous leap to God, ontology and then to other human beings. Now the trap closes: such a leap can only be conjuration, the magician's trick by which he attempts to escape inwardness.[25] Faith turns out to be nothing more than superstition; a reliance on magic that can manipulate the universe through peculiar acts that, when carried out correctly and in the right quantity, produce the desired result – hence the 'formulaic brevity' and repetition of Kierkegaard's writings, their pattern of 'entreaty' and 'conjuration'.

---

[24] See Kierkegaard 1995, Volume 9, pp. 107–210; Kierkegaard 1992, pp. 127–251.
[25] See Adorno 1989, pp. 57–8; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, pp. 85–6.

For all his efforts to bar the door to myth in the inner room of his soul, Kierkegaard finds, at least as far as Adorno is concerned, that myth is quietly waiting for him after he has frantically secured the last lock *and* that myth will be his only means of escape. But why should myth be such a problem? Kierkegaard needs to be free from myth in order to be open to religiosity: in other words, one can encounter God only when the last trappings of myth have been discarded, whether these are inherent to Christianity or part of the incessant pattern of appropriation of pagan elements into Christianity. So, at this level, Adorno is, in fact, correct: should the inward realm be subject to myth, then Kierkegaard's system collapses, the core of existential faith turns out to be empty. The deeper point of all this is that inwardness is itself mythical, a fundamental myth of bourgeois ideology, but I will have more to say on this in a few moments. The question for Adorno is why, for all his relentless criticism of Kierkegaard, he should accept Kierkegaard's abhorrence of myth. Would not the step beyond Kierkegaard, beyond showing how his philosophical theology breaks down at every point, be to ask what the implications might be of taking myth as potentially benevolent rather than baleful? Rather than seeking a reality that is either beyond myth (Kierkegaard) or as the truth content of myth (Adorno), what happens if we take myth as a necessary fable, and, to go beyond Badiou and back to Bloch, as a potentially liberating fable?

Spiritualism, conjuration and superstition: thus far, three elements in the mythical underlay of Kierkegaard's radical inwardness. The last item before I turn to the question of history is subjectivity: if we grant Kierkegaard his inwardness, then the subject is its own ground. It cannot be established on anything but itself, and the movement of subjectivity can only involve an oscillation, out and back in again in what is a poor substitute for the dialectic. Or, rather, Kierkegaard's inversion of Hegel's dialectic is not materialist (Marx), but idealist, based on a radical interiority. The problem with all of this is that Kierkegaard is forced to wipe out subjectivity despite himself, and the reasons are as follows: according to his theoretical need for radical inwardness, the subject can be constituted only by itself. However, such an inwardness is inescapably mythical, and so, if Kierkegaard seeks to banish myth from his philosophical theology, then the subject must go with it. Here, we are simply at an irresolvable paradox: the subjectivity of radical inwardness relies on a myth that is unacceptable for the system in question. Adorno's

verdict is final: any idealist system such as Kierkegaard's cannot contain its mythical core forever, for in 'the final products of the idealist spirit, the mythical content simply breaks through the cells of the systematically developed concept, where philosophical criticism has banished it, and takes possession of the old images'.[26]

And yet, all this sniffing out of myth in every last corner of Kierkegaard's most inner sanctum, is but the first logical step of demythologisation. I must admit that I have actually inverted the sequence of Adorno's argument, for the whole question of history that follows, in fact, comes first in Adorno's text, before undressing Kierkegaard and finding him decked out in mythical underwear. Yet it seems to me that, logically, history comes second, for here Adorno pushes demythologisation to its next step.

For one who has agonised over Adorno's text, reading a page ten times in English and ten more in German before hazarding an interpretation, the section on inwardness and history is one of the more lucid sections of the book. And it is also thoroughly biblical, for it involves a sustained assessment of the figure of Adam from the book of Genesis. But, at a deeper level, the whole question of history is crucial for Kierkegaard precisely because of the Bible. Kierkegaard's problem is: if history is so central to Christianity – Christ's life, death and resurrection must constitute in some senses a historical event and not fable or myth – then why is it so difficult to connect with a history that continually eludes our grasp? For Kierkegaard, the answer lies with the processes of 'objectless inwardness' that provide a radically alternative contact with history. That is, the history Kierkegaard seeks is an alternative history of the inner self, an extraordinary retreat into the individual interior from where contact with the lost and enciphered meaning of the archaic text of the Bible may once again be made.

Yet, for Adorno, this is nothing other than a flight from history, but he makes his point with the biblical figure of Adam and the theological problem of original sin.[27] Adorno is nothing if not persistent and patiently thorough. His point, or at least his initial one, is that Kierkegaard cannot escape 'external history', for his resolute focus on the 'inner history' of objectless inwardness operates by means of the external category of 'race', specifically the human

---

[26] Adorno 1989, p. 57; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 84.
[27] See Kierkegaard 1995, Volume 6, pp. 109–240; Kierkegaard 1980, pp. 25–162.

race. Even though Kierkegaard tries to set up a dialectical opposition between individual and race, he cannot help but absorb objective history into 'the enclaves of isolated inwardness'.[28] How does this work with Adam? This first man's wilful sin sets up the condition of sinfulness, which is then the cause of sin for every other 'man'; yet such an objective or constant history puts Adam outside the human race, for he sins in a way different from other men. The alternative – that each person begins to sin, enacts original sin yet again like Adam, makes Adam one of the human race – denies any sense of history as a continuous and constitutive feature of the race. But Kierkegaard cannot escape external history, so his conclusion, albeit temporary, contradicts his initial position: continuous renewal is not possible, so sinfulness does in fact have a continuous history. The upshot? Adam must be out of history.

How does Kierkegaard avoid the trap? He wants to maintain the continuous history of the race and yet that forces Adam outside of that history. In an effort to sidestep the problem, the question of Adam turns from his relationship to the human race to one of historical uniqueness. As we saw, for Kierkegaard, history must be fundamentally continuous, must operate within time. This would force him into the position that Adam is thereby a prototypical, extra-historical example that sets history on its path. And yet, Kierkegaard simply cannot accept this, since uniqueness automatically excludes one from history – thereby rejecting 'the irreversible and irreducible uniqueness of the historical fact',[29] which is, for Adorno, the key to authentic history. Now that Kierkegaard has discarded historical uniqueness in one form, he tries to recover it by means of his well-known notion of the leap or the beginning: Adam becomes the first moment of a new beginning, not in the sense of uniqueness but as an inauguration. The leap, in other words, constitutes a beginning that is within continuous history and not outside it; for Adorno, this position gives up on historical uniqueness and thereby significance. And if historical significance disappears – is not Adam's sin precisely such a significant 'event'? – then history itself threatens to fade away. At this point, the two are at loggerheads – Kierkegaard will not give up on historical continuity and seeks a place for uniqueness within continuity, whereas Adorno takes the very uniqueness and significance of events as the basis of history.

---

[28] Adorno 1989, p. 33; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 50.
[29] Adorno 1989, p. 33; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 51.

A third time Adorno worries away at the tension between the singularity of Adam's sin and its place in history, now from the side of language. The problem with sin is that it is both ontologically prior *and* historically determined through language: although there is an understanding of what sin itself means as a word, although there is a concept of sin that carries through from generation to generation, each person must also enter sin through a 'qualitative leap' in order to maintain its ontological and qualitative singularity. Is not sin, after all an ontological affront to God that is unique and primary? And yet, we know what sin is, what thoughts and acts constitute sin. Kierkegaard wants to hold onto both, although he tries to squirm out of the paradox by suggesting that the word 'sin' has no content on each new occasion, being filled anew with the sense it has always carried. All of this is, of course, yet another permutation on the tension between inwardness and history: Adorno's point is not merely that Kierkegaard attempts to produce an alternative history by means of radical inwardness, one that connects us with Adam's sin through the qualitative leap that enables us to touch that inaccessible history; he is also keen to point out that, for all Kierkegaard's efforts to escape objective history, he simply cannot do so. It returns through the objective history of language (the meaning of the word 'sin'), through the effort to incorporate Adam's uniqueness within history (by means of an inaugural leap), and through the actual history of the sinfulness of the human race (which leaves Adam outside history).

Those who venture into the Kierkegaard book stop, as I pointed out earlier, with this section, and even then they rush to Adorno's socio-economic point. But Adorno is the last one to make rushed vulgar Marxist connections with the base. He is the master of delayed satisfaction, holding off the pleasure of the socio-economic point in a way that makes it all the more pleasurable when it arrives. So he tarries long with the logical tensions of Kierkegaard's efforts to block out objective history and find a new path through inwardness.

Even when he has explored as many problems within Kierkegaard's argument as he can, still Adorno holds off, for what he wants to do first is locate in Kierkegaard's writings an awareness, blocked before it becomes articulate, of the historical conditioning of objectless inwardness itself. The traces of history in Kierkegaard's writing appear in various forms, whether in the act itself whereby subjectivity recedes and closes in on itself even further in response to the external world, or in the political opinions that are responses to the

'painful intrusions of reality into the objectless interior'.[30] At *this* point, Adorno grants Kierkegaard an insight, even if it is despite himself, for Kierkegaard's responses are not merely reactionary, but absorb and give expression to the social situation of their production. And, in this process, particularly in his critique of the Church, Kierkegaard draws on the left Hegelians for a materialist critique: Kierkegaard himself cannot avoid realising that the efficient cause of the social situation that generates his life and writing, especially ideas such inwardness itself, 'is none other than the knowledge of the reification of social life, the alienation of the individual from a world that comes into focus as a mere commodity'.[31] In the end, this is the 'history' of which Adorno has been speaking, which is at the same time the truth-content of theology. It is precisely Kierkegaard's response to such a process of reification that functions as a signal of the history he perpetually seeks to reject. Of course, Kierkegaard's idealist response, namely that Christianity is the cure for reification, is entirely inadequate, but at least he recognises the problem in the first place.

For Adorno, Kierkegaard does therefore identify a certain existential and ideological crisis of capitalism: the perceived inauthenticity of the capitalist world, especially the anxiety and desolation of the individual burgher. For all Kierkegaard's solitary posturing, Adorno pushes his existential 'pure inwardness' until it yields its material and social content:

> This ideology-critical examination of the traditional problems of bourgeois thought thus redeems their truth content – that moment in them which pertains to the *antagonistic structure of reality itself* (and not merely to the structure of *thought*) – and annihilates the ideological veil of reconciliation which afflicts all merely conceptual solutions.[32]

Only now, after having worked through all of the internal problems of Kierkegaard's thought – all of which hinge on showing that the logic of Kierkegaard's philosophical theology operates with a profound tension between the effort at absolute retreat into inwardness and the inability to close history out completely – may Adorno have the extraordinary pleasure of the Marxist recourse to Kierkegaard's social and economic situation. By this time – and

---

[30] Adorno 1989, p. 38; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 58.
[31] Adorno 1989, p. 39; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 59.
[32] Wolin 1982, p. 172.

this is the magic of Adorno's analysis – Kierkegaard himself demands such an analysis.[33] Here, Adorno makes the famous point that Kierkegaard's work cannot be understood without the crucial role in his written and personal life of the spacious and fortress-like 'bourgeois *intérieur* of the nineteenth century'.[34] This *intérieur* is both metaphor and physical location: Kierkegaard was a *rentier*, an individual who lived off an inheritance, working on his own in a room isolated from outside. Yet, this apparent rejection of capitalism, down to the refusal to put his money out to interest, embodies the logic of capitalism itself: the autonomy of the isolated individual working to his own agenda – for Kierkegaard in theoretical and personal retreat – expresses the deepest logic of liberalism. For, in such a contradictory way, liberalism has its collective power: although each individual believes he or she is working entirely independently, perhaps even polemically in opposition to the evils of capitalism, the very act of doing so makes them part of a larger whole.

To cap it off, Adorno's moment of the truth-content of theology loops back to suggest not only that space rather than time is the key to Kierkegaard's philosophy and theology, but that the 'situation', Christianity, goes hand in hand with the modern apartment; one cannot be thought, in Kierkegaard, without the other. Kierkegaard's Christianity in the context of a Christian Europe is itself part of the ideology of liberalism, as is Kierkegaard's own very liberal response, namely the isolation and reification of the private individual. His theoretical answer – radical inwardness – is now at one with historical situation, a situation saturated with the legacy of Christianity without which capitalism would not have been possible.

It is a brilliant argument in itself, but also because we see here that the inner workings of his famous immanent critique were honed on the theological matter of Kierkegaard's writings. Built into the critique of Kierkegaard's objectless inwardness is an effort to show how a dialectical reading of theology might work – something he so much hoped Benjamin would do. But we should not forget that it is also the end run of a thorough process of demythologisation: the mythical underlay of Kierkegaard's thought has its basis in a distinct historical situation.

---

[33] See Adorno 1989, p. 49; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 72.
[34] Adorno 1989, p. 41; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 61.

Christology

Regrettably, Adorno makes the historical move only with the argument concerning radical inwardness. In fact, I found myself wanting it badly in the other arguments of the book, especially those on sacrifice (Christology) and the spheres (cosmology). Instead, he adopts the dominant pattern in the book, namely a dual critique that moves from myth to paradox: the moment of identifying the mythic patterns of various items in Kierkegaard's thought gives way to the irresolvable paradoxes of these same items. And, in Adorno's eyes, these paradoxes shake Kierkegaard's system into crumbling ruins. This strategy is crucial for the notion of theological suspicion that is so important in Adorno's work.

In what follows, I pick up the two key moments, Christology and sacrifice, which will then allow me to focus on the key theological question of reconciliation. As for Christology, Adorno makes much of the mythical core of propitiatory atonement (Christ takes the punishment for our sins upon himself), the key to Kierkegaard's Christology. On the face of it, there is nothing earth-shattering here, since many theologians and biblical critics have made and continue to make the same point. Yet Adorno's argument is more astute than the banal point that Christology is inescapably mythical. Rather, his criticism is that propitiatory atonement renders grace useless – and, here, Adorno is a thoroughly Lutheran thinker. I will turn to grace below, save to pick up Adorno's point here that such a Christology operates according to a 'graceless mythical calculus',[35] a calculus whereby Christ becomes a substitute for human beings, a sacrifice so that humans do not need to suffer the consequences of their acts. That this becomes the basis of the search for meaning, the point at which transcendence touches individual lives, where Christ and man meet, is the nub of the problem, for in the absence of grace the whole notion of reconciliation makes a hasty exit from the theological scene. But note what has happened here! Instead of uncovering yet another moment of myth, Adorno has, in fact, resorted to theology itself to make his argument: without grace reconciliation is meaningless. This is the Adorno that intrigues me in these arguments, the moments he lets us glimpse the possibilities for theology after theological suspicion has done its work.

---

[35] Adorno 1989, p. 111; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 157.

For now, I am more intrigued by Adorno's further argument that Kierkegaard's Christology suffers from a lethal dose of gnosticism, the mythical core of propitiatory atonement. For Adorno, gnosis 'erupts in late idealism when – through spiritualism – mythical thought gains power over Christian thought, and, in spite of all talk of grace, draws Christianity into the graceless immanence of the course of nature'.[36] Let us stay with gnosis for a few moments. As he outlines the various, albeit masked, gnostic doctrines of Kierkegaard, Adorno characteristically defines gnosis indirectly, drawing it out by means of his immanent criticism. And he prefers 'gnosis' to gnostic or gnosticism. But this does not in the end avoid the problem of the sheer variety of gnosticisms that flourished in the early centuries of the Christian era and carried on in a range of half-lives as the consistent underside of theology ever since.

By restricting his usage to 'gnosis', Adorno implies the defining feature of gnosticism as saving knowledge, a secret knowing – code words, the truth about existence, a radical dualism between evil matter and the spark of the soul that has been trapped in nature and forgotten itself, the salvation of the spirit through imparting a restricted knowledge – that enables the soul to escape the realm of nature and matter. Christologically, this means that Christ's soul did not die; his material body or a substitute was left on the cross, thereby fooling the evil hordes, or even the creating demiurge of the Old Testament, who all believed they had killed God himself. The link for Adorno – although this content is not made explicit – is with Kierkegaard's abhorrence of nature in all its senses: nature is that from which the follower escapes by means of Christ's propitiatory death, and yet this escape is doomed before it may begin. Thus, the 'real basis' of Kierkegaard's mythology lies in his gnostic doctrines, which now connect with the questions of fate and propitiation: neither Christ nor God can prevent the fate of Christ's death, since this, precisely as propitiatory atonement, becomes a necessary step for redemption that simultaneously robs it of any efficacy. Further, this death becomes an 'offence' not merely because it is a propitiation for sinful human beings, but for what lies beyond human sin itself, namely the realm of evil nature from which Christ promises a futile rescue.

The point is very astute on Adorno's part, for propitiatory atonement is indeed a doctrine that trades on certain features of gnostic thought. Not only

---

[36] Adorno 1989, p. 112; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 159.

are human souls trapped within nature, but God himself is similarly imprisoned, particularly in his binding in human nature in the incarnation. Yet, this is the ultimate expression of necessity, for God cannot help but succumb to such a fate – God *must* be incarnated in Christ, in nature, so that the punishment due to human beings may be taken by Christ, so that, in other words, redemption can take place. The sheer necessity of this particular schema of redemption puts God at the mercy of fate, but the problem for Adorno is that Kierkegaard's evocation of God's own fate sucks all the air out of the prison of nature where he is caught. In this environment, where fate – a force outside God – renders God helpless, such a God fades from existence: 'Mythical dialectic consumes Kierkegaard's god, as did Kronos his children'.[37]

Yet, identifying myth is but the first step; Adorno will then move on, not to history so much as to the problem of paradox. Here, Kierkegaard is inescapably a theologian, for theology deals with myriad paradoxes, such as the dual nature of Christ (fully man and fully human), transcendence and immanence, punctual time and eternity, and the bind of theodicy (the tension between evil, God's omnipotence and love). Indeed, for Adorno, this is precisely the problem with Kierkegaard and with theology more generally: while his understanding of dialectics must have paradox as the starting point, Kierkegaard annoyingly insists that paradox is the answer, the end point of the argument that loudly proclaims the limits of human thought.[38] Adorno will worry away at this assumption for most of the book: 'The paradox is Kierkegaard's fundamental, categorical form'[39] and Adorno is not going to let Kierkegaard get away with it.

Out of the density of Adorno's text, I choose one instance of Christological paradox – time and eternity. The point Adorno wants to make is that paradoxes like these are the fertile ground in which the dialectic may and should take root. Except, for Kierkegaard, the dance of the dialectic falters – a misstep here, a falter there, one partner begins dancing to a different beat and soon they give up altogether. The fatal problem with Kierkegaard's discussion of time and eternity is the recurring problem of nature: nature, especially fallen nature, has for Kierkegaard no history, whereas time is that which

---

[37] Adorno 1989, p. 113; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 161.
[38] See Kierkegaard, 1995, Volume 6, pp. 38–52; Kierkegaard 1985, pp. 37–54.
[39] Adorno 1989, p. 115; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 164.

distinguishes human existence from nature. The problem is that Kierkegaard attributes timelessness, a feature of nature, to Christ, in direct contradiction with his insistence on the historicity of God's appearance in Christ.[40] Adorno picks up on Kierkegaard's phrase 'this nota bene on a page of universal history' to argue that this is precisely a signal of the lack of historical specificity in regard to Christ's incarnation: he might have appeared at any moment in time, interchangeable with any other. Thus, rather than marking in a unique fashion the possibility of history itself – Adorno's very definition of history itself, as we saw a little earlier – the life of Christ becomes timeless, falling back into nature. And this nature is specifically 'fallen nature', the state of human beings in the world after the Fall. Of course, this means that Christ cannot effect any redemption: trapped in nature as timeless, he has no way of extracting himself from nature, let alone anyone else who may be interested in redemption. For Kierkegaard, this is a real problem, since he desperately wants to get himself out of such a fallen nature; and, for the Adorno of this early work, nature is not a particularly desirable state.

Sacrifice

All of this is only a warm up before taking the central category of Kierkegaard's thought – sacrifice.[41] And he will let Kierkegaard have it on both counts, showing how sacrifice is both mythical and paradoxical, so much so that it leads to the sacrifice of reason itself. As for myth, Adorno is beginning to enjoy himself, flexing his dialectical muscles: all Kierkegaard's bans on myth, he points out, are but screens for myth itself: 'Blinded, however, it escapes him that the image of sacrifice is itself mythical and occupies the innermost cell of his thought, accessible equally by way of his philosophy as by his theology'.[42] Using Kierkegaard's dialectic against him, Adorno argues that, in the very effort to remove the mythical origin of sacrifice, he makes use of sacrifice. However much he exploits the ambiguity of myth to extirpate myth, he cannot escape it.

---

[40] See Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 230–48; Kierkegaard 1992, pp. 561–81. See also Kierkegaard 1995, pp. 24–46; Kierkegaard 1992, pp. 23–49.

[41] See especially Kierkegaard 1995, Volume 5, pp. 7–111; Kierkegaard 1983, pp. 5–123.

[42] Adorno 1989, p. 110; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 156.

But what is the myth that riddles Kierkegaard's notion of sacrifice? None other than the Nordic myth of Odhinn-Wódhan,[43] the god who rules over all things but sacrifices himself for himself. Patron of the *jarl* [nobles], possessor of the great spear Gungnir, a treacherous and untrustworthy god of war and the brotherhoods of warriors, also of poetry, magic, wisdom (especially in war) and runes, Odhinn's creatures were the raven and the wolf that fed on the bodies of the slain. Dweller of Valhalla, he welcomed warriors fallen in battle, but also demanded human and animal sacrifices which the *jarl* provided for him by raiding the villages of the *karl* (free-men, whose god was Thorr). These sacrifices were hung from trees and stabbed with spears, often around temples, in memory of Odhinn's own hanging: strung from the world-tree Yggdrasill for nine days, bearing a spear-wound, he sacrifices himself for the secret of the runes, for knowledge itself. In the *Hávamál*, Odhinn speaks thus:

> I know I hung
> On the windswept Tree,
> Through nine days and nights.
> I was stuck with a spear
> and given to Odhinn,
> myself given to myself.[44]

For Adorno, this is the key – 'myself given to myself' – to Kierkegaard's theory of sacrifice (although I have had to overcome Adorno's obtuseness here with a few details). The point is that the myth of Odhinn's self-sacrifice gives us the essence of Kierkegaard's idealism, the rash claim that thought itself, reason, is able to generate not only reality but redemption itself. Yet, does not Kierkegaard seek to overcome idealism through sacrifice? Ostensibly yes, but the myth betrays him, for his use of Christ's sacrifice is saturated with the myth of Odhinn's sacrifice. This means, for Adorno, that Kierkegaard seeks both to transcend his idealist system and, by the same act, hold it together; he negates all the claims of idealism and then grasps them.

Let me exegete for a moment a key quotation from Adorno, one that is typically overlaid with multiple levels. It reads:

---

[43] See also Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 54.
[44] Davidson 1964, pp. 143–4.

> The model of this sacrifice is paradoxy: a movement of thought, completed in our thought, and negated as totality in this movement of thought, in order, sacrificed, to draw toward itself the 'strictly different,' its absolute contrary.[45]

The ghost of Odhinn haunts this sentence, the paradox of the god who sacrifices himself for knowledge (thought itself), but then idealism itself comes to the fore: thought is both completed and negated in order to draw in the contrary, the other that it believes it has constituted through the power of thought alone. But such an idealist dialectic has about as much chance of connecting with the other (Hegel's moment of the negative) as Odhinn has of being reliable and trustworthy. Finally, reconciliation peers out from beneath the words: any effort at reconciliation, the effort to reconcile oneself with any other, can hardly proceed from and return to oneself, gathering the other in the process. Idealism, staring at the onset of immanent collapse, has no access to such reconciliation, cannot achieve the cathartic reconciliation promised by sacrifice, since reconciliation is precisely that category excluded by the realm of pure thought that characterises idealism. Or, if we replace 'thought' with 'nature', redemption that comes from nature can never rise above nature; it must fall back, exhausted, into nature: reconciliation thereby becomes 'the imperceptible gesture in which guilty nature renews itself historically as created nature'.[46]

The key paradox, then, is idealism, although all of Kierkegaard's much beloved paradoxes also come into play – revelation/mystery, happiness/suffering, certainty/uncertainty, ease/difficulty of religious truth/absurdity. Kierkegaard's problem is that he tries to overcome the primary paradox of idealism by means of sacrifice; unfortunately for him, this sacrifice is caught in the myth of Odhinn that replicates the idealist paradox. Hence, sacrifice is the 'essence [*Gehalt*] of paradoxy'.[47] And, with the incessant rattling of this idealist paradox, Kierkegaard's system falls apart: what appears to be a dialectic is one in name only. Or, rather, he is closer to Hegel than he cares to think. In all his opposition, Kierkegaard replicates the idealism of Hegel, suffering an inverse fate:

---

[45] Adorno 1989, p. 113; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 161.
[46] Adorno 1989, p. 120; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 172.
[47] Adorno 1989, p. 116; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 165.

> Reason, which in Hegel as infinite reason produces actuality out of itself, is in Kierkegaard, again as infinite reason, the negation of all finite knowledge: if the former is mythical by its claim to universal sovereignty, the latter becomes mythical through universal annihilation.[48]

Odhinn's final battle at Ragnarok, when Loki and the wolf Fenrir are let loose, marks the collapse of Kierkegaard's system. This is the 'sacrifice of reason' to which Adorno has been working, the sheer inability of reason to function in any capacity in Kierkegaard's thought. In the end, sacrifice becomes not merely a signal of the inability of reason to function in any capacity, but also the very means by which reason is rendered incapable. The effort to hold his system together through sacrifice fails spectacularly, going every which way in a shower of sparks.

Not a bad argument, it seems to me, particularly in the way the uncovering of myth and identification of paradox mesh with one another, but, again, I am left wanting more, especially on the question of reconciliation. Adorno refuses to say anything more on reconciliation, and even then I have had to spell it out – the reconciliation of myself with the other, with what is 'strictly different'. Does he mean reconciliation between human beings and God – this would, in fact, be the primary theological meaning of the word – or between human beings themselves – the subsidiary theological point? If so, he does not say so. My suspicion is that spelling out what he means by reconciliation would draw him too far into theology, although he could always answer that the ban on images comes into play here, that we cannot in fact know or say what reconciliation is since we have not as yet experienced it, at least on a political and social level.

Cosmology: the spheres

It is all beginning to read like a thorough demolition job; indeed, the subtitle of the Kierkegaard study may well have read 'all I leave are the memories'. I do find this somewhat troubling, not so much because I have a soft spot for Kierkegaard but because it is, to be blunt, a betrayal of the dialectic. Would not a more dialectical reading have been to draw Kierkegaard up into a wider

[48] Adorno 1989, p. 119; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 169.

problematic, to recast his questions and problems into another set of questions? At least Adorno should have asked: what are the implications for theology and philosophy, given the inadequacies of Kierkegaard's thought?

But, for now, Adorno razes Kierkegaard to the ground one more time, on the question of the spheres, or, as I have recast it, a demythologisation of cosmology. So let us see what he does here with a deep structure of Kierkegaard's works. Kierkegaard's famous spheres – the aesthetic, ethical and religious – are both hierarchically and dialectical related, mediated by irony and humour. Again, two phases characterise Adorno's argument, the one that they are ultimately theological and therefore mythical, and the other that the dialectic of the spheres fails to achieve the desired unity, becoming a 'totality of ruins'[49] due to the inherent idealism of Kierkegaard's dialectic in which they become ruling 'ideas'.

Theologically, the spheres operate within a vertical world between heaven and hell, eternity and damnation, with the aesthetic at the lowest point, moving between despair and objective damnation. Irony mediates, as a *confinien*, between it and the ethical, the middle realm, which then moves to the religious via humour, at which point the holy or apostolic life may be found. But the relationship is also dialectical, with all three spheres rubbing up against one another.

As for myth, Adorno's dialectical reading moves from the spheres as distinct entities, through their status as concepts to their magical and hypostatised forms. The initial signal of myth's presence in the dialectic of the spheres is language itself, for the nomenclature of the spheres is astral. The spheres, apart from assuring Kant's notion of the moral law beneath the stars in heaven, both echo and derive from the Pythagorean/Orphic music of the spheres that Plato found so appealing. Here, the mythical element takes astrological form and Adorno argues that Kierkegaard's formulations themselves betray such a linguistic debt. Echoing Kierkegaard, Adorno writes:

> The most universal concepts, posited by consciousness to order its multifarious contents, appear to consciousness as alien, meaning conferring powers that define their own course. They direct the individual's fate the more completely the stranger they become to him; the more hidden their human origins; the more, that is, that abstraction progresses in them.[50]

---

[49] Adorno 1989, p. 90; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 130.
[50] Adorno 1989, p. 91; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 131.

Like astrology, in which inanimate pieces of rock affect one's individual characteristics and personal decisions and events, the spheres become alien bodies, dictating one's life according to the logic of fate. Although Kierkegaard would hardly believe *this*, for Adorno he does in fact hold that universal concepts fall under the sway of astrology.

By now, Adorno has become a little impatient with stripping Kierkegaard down to his mythological underwear: with the spheres he is far more interested in the logical paradoxes they pose for the dialectic. To begin with, Kierkegaard's own model of the spheres is riven, somewhat ironically, with a tension between 'a dialectic immanent to the spheres and one between the spheres'.[51] This tension produces its own contradiction between a Hegelian immanent dialectic and one of the leap across the abyss between the spheres that transforms one into the other – from the lowest, the aesthetic, through ethics to the highest, the religious, mediated by the fluid boundaries [*confinien*] of irony and humour and occasionally the 'interesting' or even the ethical itself. In order to explicate the contradiction, Adorno resorts yet again to a theological problem that highlights the problem, namely, 'miracle'.[52]

At first, this might seem like a strange way to open up the contradictions in Kierkegaard's dialectic of the spheres. But let us see what Adorno does with them: miracles are caught in Kierkegaard's system between believer and non-believer, for in neither case do they 'work', despite Kierkegaard's claims. For the non-believer, miracles can make him 'attentive', but not compel belief. In fact, he may equally decide to accept or reject the faith towards which miracles point. This means that miracles can be only for believers, but this falls away from the paradox of belief, fixing it as an eternal proof of faith. Yet they cannot be, for Kierkegaard, proofs of faith, since faith can happen only through the leap. In either case, the categories are mutually exclusive, but Kierkegaard's point is that the tension can be resolved through a qualitative dialectic that scorns Hegelian *Vermittlung*, mediation, as nothing more than 'interposition [*Mediation*]'. Now Adorno pounces, for it is not possible to operate a dialectical argument without mediation [*Vermittlung*]. There are two possible outcomes in this situation: without mediation, the paradox of miracle becomes a pure negation, absolute difference, and then the dialectic freezes, closing

[51] Adorno 1989, p. 98; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 140.
[52] See Kierkegaard 1995, Volume 16, pp. 98–9; Kierkegaard 1991, pp. 96–7.

down into a 'simple limiting condition'.[53] Alternatively, the paradox of the miracles is in fact mediated and miracles work for both believer as signs of the life of faith and for the non-believer as signs of how one might enter this life. But let us pause for a moment and backtrack to the leap, to the means of avoiding mediation: if the leap, as the only entry into faith, overcomes the paradox of miracles, how does one enter faith via the leap? Here, the ambivalence and difficulty of the whole dialectic of the spheres emerges:

> Where the conception of this dialectic is defined by the categories of the leap, the absolutely different and the paradox, there can be no room for the authentic dialectic. As a movement, the 'leap' is not commensurable with any dialectical movement immanent to the sphere; it is not demonstrable in any act of consciousness. Paradoxical in itself and otherworldly, the leap reveals itself to be an act of election: the consummation of an irrational doctrine of predestination that is perhaps the foundation of Kierkegaard's 'Baroque'.[54]

Kierkegaard has merely replaced one paradox with another, this time between the leap of faith and the election of believers, or, between free will and grace. It is, in other words, the old theological paradox whereby what seems to be an act of pure choice, above all a decision for God rather than against, turns out, in hindsight, to be a manifestation of election. And theological paradox is the death of the dialectic, as far as Adorno is concerned, for such paradoxes are the end of the run rather than its inaugural moment. In its stronger terms, the issue is predestination, to which Luther and the Lutheran tradition were bound; in the light of the extraordinarily rich doctrine of predestination, Kierkegaard's notion of the leap becomes nonsensical, for there is no longer any risk or uncertainty, the key to the leap itself.

As the spheres begin to break up in Adorno's hands, he extricates the unbearable tension between dialectics and hierarchy. For the spheres themselves run in descending order, from the religious through the ethical to the aesthetic, which, for Kierkegaard, implies a certain unintelligibility between the spheres: the lower spheres cannot make intelligible that which appears in higher spheres. But Adorno is after something more: on these terms, any dia-

---

[53] Adorno 1989, p. 99: Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 141.
[54] Adorno 1989, p. 99; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 142.

lectic will break down, whether through the leap or through intrigue. By the leap one may pass from one sphere to the other, but only by intrigue, argues Kierkegaard, may the hierarchy of the spheres relate to each other. The effort to overcome this paradox by means of the notion of 'projection', in which the higher spheres seek to project themselves into the lower spheres, only generates further problems. In fact, these efforts at the projection of one sphere into another fail abysmally, for it is not possible to move downwards in the hierarchy, since higher spheres cannot be understood by lower ones except by intrigue, and so the hierarchy itself fails to be ordered. Any religious item cannot be understood in the ethical or the aesthetic, nor can the ethical be comprehended in the aesthetic. But where is Adorno going with this argument?

> In Kierkegaard 'higher' spheres may not be arbitrarily depicted in 'lower' spheres; the 'leap' precludes adequate projection, and in the necessity of dissimulations the system of the spheres shows itself as a totality in fragments. The projection of the phenomena of a higher sphere into a lower means falsification and, therefore, every statement of the 'religious' sphere remains incomprehensible for the aesthetic sphere because it is already falsified by mere depiction.[55]

Not only does the dialectic of the spheres collapse, but Kierkegaard's own thought precludes any effort to base aesthetics or ethics in theology – both spheres lower than the religious – for all that results is the falsification, by intrigue and deception, of the theological categories in the effort to produce an aesthetics or ethics.

What of the reverse process, from the lower spheres to the higher? Over against intrigue and dissimulation for the step downward, transcendence refers to the reverse, the way the spheres move out of themselves. Here, Kierkegaard concentrates on the way the aesthetic may move into the religious and Adorno follows through the various modes by which this happens: the extreme moment of decisiveness for the aesthetic (in contrast to the ever-present leap for the religious), and the 'exception' as the moment of that transcendence (the poet, marriage, feminine romanticism, or human being as such). Decisiveness and the exception then mark such a movement upwards, but it is Kierkegaard's characterisation of this movement towards transcendence

[55] Adorno 1989, p. 103; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 147.

that is most intriguing. He seeks this transcendence in incommensurable moments or situations in which aesthetics points beyond itself, where there is no ostensible reason for its expression. This is Kierkegaard's 'concretion', the inward and simple expression of a value that can speak incommensurably of transcendence, such as poetry or love. Who has not felt that moment of transcendence in a lover's eyes, or perhaps in a stunning piece of literature?

Enigmatic as ever, Adorno mentions the 'concrete' or 'concretion' a few times before passing on to his next point, but I want to grab Adorno by the collar and hold him in his tracks for a few moments. By concrete, Adorno refers not only to Kierkegaard's notion (and, remember, Adorno *will not* be seduced by Kierkegaard's poetry) but also to a more Marxist sense where the concrete indicates the specificity of political economics and historical location. And it is this concrete that Kierkegaard cannot avoid and yet seeks to negate through his alternative sense of 'concrete' as the transcendent exception. For the first sense of concrete appears all the more insistently the more Kierkegaard tries to escape it, particularly with the escape into radical inwardness. Here lies the irresolvable paradox of Kierkegaard's notion of concretion: the very possibility of his alternative notion of concretion as exception relies upon the historical sense of the term, a sense he deeply wants to banish.

But Adorno is not content to rest, and so he turns the contradiction of concretion and Kierkegaard's resistance to it into a mark of the system itself, namely the 'ultimate contradiction' of the whole dialectic that Kierkegaard tries to establish. Why does Kierkegaard's effort at a dialectics fail? In the end, paradox begs for an adequate dialectic, something that Adorno himself is keen to establish. Although paradox lies at the heart of Kierkegaard's philosophy, the problem is that, rather than taking paradox as a dialectical category par excellence, as the object that allows the dialectic to begin its work, Kierkegaard falls victim to the theological treatment of paradox. That is, the mere arrival at paradox – doctrine of the Trinity, the nature of Christ, time and eternity, transcendence and immanence, free will and grace, miracle, etc. – is the signal of the end of inquiry rather than its beginning. The problem with Kierkegaard is that the paradoxes of theology are themselves not open to dialectical analysis, however much he may protest otherwise. The theological propositions with which Kierkegaard works are external, revealed 'truth contents' which appear in the highest sphere, the religious. This means that the various phenomena of the spheres – religious, ethical and aesthetic – do not arise from within the system itself, but externally. With the externally revealed truths of theology,

Kierkegaard's system fails as a dialectical one because there is no mediation – a category that will remain central to Adorno's exercise of the dialectic.[56] Even the use of the ethical sphere itself as a mediation between the religious and the aesthetic fails, for these two crush the ethical between them as a mode of passing from one to the other: 'Theological truth crashes down to human level as aesthetic truth and reveals itself to man as a sign of hope',[57] except that such a 'hope' becomes feeble due to the abruptness of the crash.

Even though I have voiced my doubts about the need for stamping Kierkegaard's system to dust and then scattering it in the brook nearby, the critique of theological paradox is a pertinent one. Kierkegaard gives precedence to theology – and theological readings, as Adorno points out, are entirely correct to focus on paradox as the key to Kierkegaard's work – at the expense of an adequate or workable philosophy or aesthetics. And yet, despite his profound suspicion of Kierkegaard's theology as entirely false within itself, Adorno only just hints at a way in which theology would have a legitimate place: when the paradoxes of theology become the beginning of dialectics, rather than the final answer of a system of thought, then the 'truth content' of theology may begin to appear, however different it may be from its ostensible content.

I have, by and large, done with the Kierkegaard book. Apart from carefully sinking into the text itself, with its tight and unrelenting sentences, I have also been on the lookout for the workings of what I have called Adorno's theological suspicion. If I have found the study wanting at certain points – too concerned with undertaking a complete demolition job on Kierkegaard, unwilling to pursue guarded hints, and assuming a little too much from Kierkegaard, especially concerning myth and nature – then I also want to hold to the necessity of theological suspicion, especially where paradox is the final word, the terminus of any theological argument rather than the beginning of a far more interesting dialectic. Yet, such a theological suspicion does not mean that we can turn our backs on theology, brushing the dust from our sandals before we set out on the road.

---

[56] 'The materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the total social process' (Adorno, Lonitz and Benjamin 1999, p. 283; Adorno 1994, p. 367), the lack of which he also accuses Benjamin.

[57] Adorno 1989, p. 104; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 148.

Secularised theology

I feel as though I have circumnavigated a vast continent of thought and then traversed its tough and rugged interior. But, before I can get too carried away with my sense of achievement, all I need to do is remind myself is that this is only the first philosophical book. And so I turn to that other central engagement with theology, namely the criticism of secularised theology. This will come as a contested surprise to those who work on Adorno: does he not, after all, make use of terms such as reconciliation, redemption and above all the ban on images? Indeed, Adorno is often credited with the suggestion that theology must undergo a radical purge of its bowels so that its language and ways of thinking may be invested with a clean, new and thoroughly secularised content.[58] Less an observation about a process that had already been underway from the Enlightenment, it is read as prescription of dialectics itself, a radical flushing out and remoulding for the purpose of contemporary radical thought. If this is the case – that Adorno is a secular theologian – then he is hardly alone, as the various critics I have discussed in this book or the new wave of political theology at the beginning of the new millennium makes abundantly clear.

Now, I could argue that Adorno never makes use of a secularised theological concept, but let me take the more modest position that, although he has a propensity to slip into such a mode at times, he also develops an extraordinary criticism of such secularised theology (what Marx would call the passage from the criticism of theology to the criticism of politics). So, let me track that critique of secularised theology rather closely. The catch is that the criticism of secularised theology is inseparable from the famous ban on images or

[58] So, among many others, Buck-Morss 1977, p. 141. In this respect, Wellmer 1990, pp. 38, 40 is fundamentally mistaken when he argues that Adorno attempted to outdo Marx's critique of religion through a materialist appropriation of theology, a secularising of the transcending impulse. So also Hanssen: 'As a method and interpretation, negative dialectics – as Adorno had in fact posited early on in his study – was to be thought of as the secularization of the holy scriptures' (Hanssen 1998, p. 81). Jameson's observation (Jameson 1990, p. 118) that the ban on images is the means by which Adorno's own secularisation of theology moves over to a concern with the body, misses the point that both the ban and the body comprise not so much theology emptied of content as theological categories themselves. By contrast, Habermas is as perceptive as always: 'Adorno (atheistic like Benjamin – although not in the same way) opposes the false abolition of religion with a restoration of utopian contents that constitute a ferment for uncompromising critical thought, though this specifically avoids taking the form of a universalized secular illumination' (Habermas 1979, p. 43).

Bilderverbot: while the ban itself is, in many respects, the basis for the criticism, the criticism of secularised theology raises the question as to what the ban is if it is not a secularised theological category. So, I begin with the criticism of secularised theology itself, before passing on to consider the ban on images.

In doing so, I am going to trawl through another of Adorno's less read books – *The Jargon of Authenticity*, originally intended to be part of *Negative Dialectics*, as well as the more recently unearthed lectures on metaphysics translated as *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*.[59] Out of these texts, three moments of the criticism of secularised theology emerge, two from the jargon book and one from the metaphysics lectures: the attack on existentialism and especially Adorno's favourite punching bag, Heidegger; the danger of a metaphysics that seeks to base its authority in thought alone; and the partial secularisation of liberal theology.

As for the *Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno wants to do the same to existentialism as he tried to do to Kierkegaard – raze it to the ground, and, this time like the Romans in Carthage, sow it liberally with salt for good measure. That the existentialism of the early twentieth century was, in many respects, Kierkegaard's legacy did not help Adorno's appreciation, but, at another level, the rejection of Hegelian reason and Marxist political solutions represented everything about liberal ideology to which the Frankfurt school was opposed. I am, however, listening with different ears to this text, attuned to the theological cadences that run side by side with those of existentialism: so, even though Adorno takes on Jaspers and Heidegger in the book, I am after the theological questions, references to figures such as Martin Buber and Paul Tillich, but, above all, the argument that the early Heidegger's use of secularised theological concepts leaves the foundations of existentialism termite-ridden.

I am going to give Adorno his head for a few moments, since we need to let him give the early Heidegger's existentialism a good shove before we can pick up the problem of secularised theology. The argument of *The Jargon of Authenticity* is that, in the name of a critique of alienation and the ways hitherto used to overcome it, existentialism in fact became a mystification of that

[59] The hand of Rolf Tiedemann is heavy on these lectures. As he openly admits in the 'Editor's Afterword' (Adorno 2000, pp. 191–8) the quality of the tapes is poor and the transcriber seemed to have little sense of the lectures, let alone the many Greek terms. Thus, Tiedemann often needed to reconstruct sentences and the meaning itself of the text.

very process of domination and oppression, and it did so through its inherent idealism, the self-experience and self-production of subjectivity that loses or negates the crucial relationship between the existential subject and its objective historical content and context. Nothing that had not been argued earlier, except that, in *The Jargon of Authenticity*, the argument runs a different course. It passes through the terminology of existentialism, a particular language that became a widespread jargon – in theology, paedagogy, youth organisations, business and administration – which closes down the possibility that language will relate in some way to truth. By 'truth', Adorno quite explicitly refers to the reality not so much of the political and economic situation to which language relates as to the dialectical and mediated relation between language and political economics, all of which can then reveal the function of ideology. Adorno's own argument is then a model for such an identification of truth in the very act of criticising existentialism's inability to do so. Thus, the 'truth' of the jargon is that it is a form of ideology, in this case a specific mode of language and thinking that serves, by positing its message through its own nature, to oppress rather than liberate.

The thickest sections of *The Jargon of Authenticity* are given over to Jaspers and Heidegger, the latter especially appearing time and again for another punishing bout. But it is the earlier pages that register on my mental radar, given the central role of theologians within existentialism. Indeed, the first pages of *The Jargon of Authenticity* deal with the twist given to the theological legacy of Kierkegaard. For 'a number of people active in philosophy, sociology, and theology'[60] had decided that it was not so much the content of religion, or more specifically theology, but the act of conviction itself that was the key. Although named on only one or two occasions, the letters between Adorno and Tillich indicate that Adorno had Tillich primarily in mind. Proposed as a way to move beyond the specificity of Christianity so as to incorporate any form of religious belief, Adorno saw it as a renewed form of mystification, the exacerbation of all the vilest enchantments of Kierkegaard's thought. The problem for Adorno was not the loss of an external referent for theology but the turn inward, the legitimacy rendered to the act of believing by an autonomous subject. For only this act could be 'authentic' in the jargon of existentialism.

---

[60] Adorno 1973a, p. 3; Adorno 1965, p. 7.

The religious streams of existentialism were not restricted to Christianity, especially the liberal theology of which Tillich was the most distinctive representative. For Martin Buber, whose work – along with that of Kierkegaard and Tillich – continues to be influential, brings a Jewish bent to existentialism. Buber's appeal lay in providing a greater metaphysical and theological depth to the act rather that the object of belief. The I-Thou relationship supersedes the I-It relationship – although it constantly threatens to fall back into reification – not by emphasis on the object of the relationship but on the relationship itself in all its intimacy. It matters not whether the relationship is with God, another human being, or indeed any other animate being. For Buber, while the prime relationship is with God, such transcendence comes from below, from the relationship between 'man and man'.

Adorno finds the appropriation of Buber into Christian theology and then existentialism a warmed-up irrationalism, a founding of metaphysics on stupidity, the result of removing Kierkegaard's Christology from his theory of existence and universalising it. Theology breaks down its crucial demarcations between natural and supernatural, immanence and transcendence, life and death, losing any viable position. Adorno's criticism bites, for Buber's warm and fuzzy irrationalism becomes central to the jargon in which Heidegger took up Buber. In fact, it is Heidegger who, with his 'diminished theological tone',[61] provides the theoretical and systematic depth to the more vague aspirations of existentialism. Had he not existed he would have had to be invented in any case, at least in his earlier incarnation, for his appeal and popularity lay in the clear articulation of the hazy thoughts of 'the dark drives of the intelligentsia before 1933'.[62]

Heidegger's effort in *Being and Time* to develop a metaphysics by appropriating theological notions of experience without theology – for Heidegger, the structures of the experience of death become the structures of *Dasein* – is, for Adorno, the most ideological part of Heidegger's work. His sleight-of-hand lies in the effort to develop a non-theological concept of death: in explicit recognition of the decline of positive religion, this effort ends up being a subtle manoeuvre to reintroduce theological concepts. The problem is that the experience that theology posited – in this case, death – is no longer possible without

[61] Adorno 1973a, p. 5; Adorno 1965, p. 8; translation modified.
[62] Adorno 1973a, p. 5; Adorno 1965, p. 8.

theology. But, in order to develop a concept of death, Heidegger must then smuggle theology back in.[63] Heidegger tries to refill the empty theological pots with a non-theological mix – in short, to espouse a secularised theology.

A further feature of such a fateful secularisation is the shift to religion as religion, to the act of belief itself. For 'the jargon secularises the German readiness to view men's positive relation to religion as something immediately positive, even when the religion has disintegrated and been exposed as something untrue'.[64] For Adorno – and I cannot emphasise this enough – any notion of a secularised theology is an 'insult not only to thought but also to religion'.[65] The insult to thought we can readily understand, but what intrigues me to no end is the insult to religion: I assume he is talking about theology here, but this means that theology itself is badly done by with such a secularised theology. Indeed, it is precisely the assumed pervasiveness of secularised theology that Adorno finds such a bane to theology itself.

Apart from the criticism of the transformation of progress into a secular concept, a process already implicit in Augustine's *Civitas Dei*, as one of idolisation,[66] we can see also a critique of Marxist efforts to secularise the Bible or theology, as most of the characters I have discussed in this book try to do. In the end, this will mean, for Adorno, not merely a slippage into the alienating patterns embedded in the language of such a secularised theology, but the amplification of the worst of such systems while anything that might have acted as a check is jettisoned.

In part due to the centrality of Kierkegaard in existentialism, Adorno finds the theological residue poisonous: its 'addictions' have 'seeped into the language', a language which 'molds thought'.[67] And this is the problem: it is not as though the content floats free of its container, language, but that language itself has its own shaping, content-producing function. The language of theology, appropriated by the early Heidegger and existentialism, has the distinct ideological role of producing patterns of subordination to an absolute authority, which is now fascism rather than God and the Church. The theological language of existentialism – which drew its sacredness from the

---

[63] See Adorno 2000, p. 107.
[64] Adorno 1973a, p. 21; Adorno 1965, p. 21.
[65] Adorno 1973a, p. 25; Adorno 1965, p. 24.
[66] See Adorno 1998, pp. 146–7; Adorno 1969, pp. 32–3.
[67] Adorno 1973a, p. 5; Adorno 1965, p. 8.

cult of authenticity rather than Christianity – becomes an ideological schema particularly suited to fascism. In the case of fascism, existentialism functioned not so much as an explicit statement, but as a 'refuge', a mystification that gave voice to an ostensible salvation from alienation that functioned as a virulent justification of oppression. In short, here we have the 'smoldering evil' of fascism.[68]

At around the same time Adorno was working on *The Jargon of Authenticity* and *Negative Dialectics*, he was also delivering his lectures on metaphysics. So, here, I want to take a break and switch to the lectures, especially since a somewhat similar criticism as the one I have just traced emerges against metaphysics. An intricate path weaves its way through the lectures, one that accounts for both the long-standing love affair between theology and metaphysics and yet their inability to live together. But what interests me is the deeper source of this tension, apart from the tactical alliances and the points where they touch, especially on the question of the absolute.

The difference between the two is as follows: what theology posits by revelation, metaphysics does by concepts, through reason. Metaphysics 'no longer does so in a belief in the direct experience of the sensible perceptibility or the substantial existence of the divinities or divinity, but *on the basis of conceptual thought*'.[69] But this is the beginning of a problem and not merely a statement of the *status quo*. Let me dig out the problem further by exegeting a sentence and a half from *Negative Dialectics*: metaphysics is 'not only theology secularised into a concept. It preserves theology in its critique, by uncovering the possibility of what theology may force upon men and thus desecrate'.[70] The very problem with the notion of a secularised theology is contained in this statement, for such a move by metaphysics merely replicates the authority structures of theology, or, to put in the terms of *Negative Dialectics*, the return to first principles that theology took up with gusto.[71] Instead of revealed dogma, ensured by the institution of the Church, conceptual thought becomes the authority, the legal basis for metaphysics. The result is that the structure of being is nothing other than the structure of thought: the elevation of thought to the key elements of the universe, so to speak. In order to avoid such a

---

[68] Adorno 1973a, p. 5; Adorno 1965, p. 9.
[69] Adorno 2000, p. 88.
[70] Adorno 1973b, p. 397; Adorno 1971, Volume 6, p. 389.
[71] Adorno 1973b, p.136; Adorno 1971, Volume 6, p. 140.

move of theology's claims to authority into philosophy, particularly in the transition from theology to metaphysics, where thought becomes the justification and jurisdiction over metaphysics, where it claims that thought is in fact metaphysics, Adorno suggests that 'metaphysics can no longer be anything other than a *thinking* about metaphysics',[72] a critical self-reflection that perpetually questions the fundamental assumption of the whole metaphysical tradition, that 'thought and its constitutive forms are *in fact* the absolute'.[73] In this perpetually self-reflective mode of metaphysics – as the thinking about metaphysics – Adorno tries to squeeze past the 'no road' sign over metaphysics usurping the position of theology in an even more insidious fashion. If metaphysics has any chance whatsoever, it is not as secularised theology, not as a rescue of theology in another register, but as a perpetual criticism that is wary of its own ground.

Adorno will not offer so much in the third moment of his criticism of secularised theology, namely the damning assessment of liberal theology. Long the way in which Christian theology made itself palatable to the 'modern world', its role was to give space to those who found the pious claptrap of the Church unbearable and yet could see no way to live outside the institution. So it became possible to dispense, one after another, with the virgin birth of Christ, the Resurrection, the notion that Christ is God's Son, the parousia, hell, and so on, and yet remain a card-carrying member. Hardly one to support a conservative opposition to liberal theology – the conflict that continues to set the boundaries of institutional and ideological life in the Church – Adorno argues that the 'theological freeing of the numinous from ossified dogma has, ever since Kierkegaard, involuntarily come to mean its partial secularisation'.[74] The key to such liberal theology is its peculiar brand of mysticism, the emphasis shifting to the relationship itself rather than any ostensible content or definition, which can only result in reification. It is, therefore, 'commitment' – a central term in the jargon – that counts, with no need to commit to any person or thing, or, indeed, speculation about such content. The terms of the jargon have become 'sacred without sacred content, as frozen emanations':[75] in this way, the refusal of reification becomes reified itself.

---

[72] Adorno 2000, p. 99.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Adorno 1973a, p. 31; Adorno 1965, p. 29.
[75] Adorno 1973a, p. 9; Adorno 1965, p. 12.

This theological move, the partial secularisation characteristic of liberal theology, provides one of the main avenues into the jargon of authenticity, which may be summed up in terms of the role of language as ideology and the positing power of the subject. The key terms themselves bear a theological residue – 'existential', 'in the decision', 'commission', 'appeal', 'encounter', 'genuine dialogue', 'statement', 'concern' – although in the end, 'what remains after the removal of existential bombast are religious customs cut off from their religious context'.[76] For instance, 'commitment', removed from any subordination to revelation or the law, becomes a category of mental hygiene, a 'medicine against nihilism'[77] that obscures precisely the element of subordination that is so objectionable in religion itself. Or, the 'doctrine of Man', derived from the theological notion of human beings created in the image of God: secularised, closed off from its theological origin, the notion of 'man' becomes a persuasive and unassailable term. The transcendence that separated man and God collapses, and man becomes divine, full of wonder, incapable of sin or evil, the image of itself for which the jargon acts as the language of worship and reverence. The subtlety of the jargon is that it worships not greatness but a universalised nothingness and powerlessness, precisely the means of ensuring acquiescence to, rather than criticism and rebellion against, the historical and political conditions of oppression. Thus, suffering, evil and death should be accepted, not in the hope of eternal life (itself highly problematic), but as part of the current state of affairs, with no hope of change, no challenge to authority. In this respect, the secularised theology of existentialism is a more potent ideology than theology. It vitiates any critique, any notion of the division of labour, and any protest.

Does Adorno want a return to theology untainted by such secularisation? Not quite, for theology hardly needs to be recovered, nor do its claims to transcendence, the transformation of death, or the desire to speak about God have anything inherently beneficial about them. The warm and irrational feeling about religion *per se*, functions not only as an ideology that masks the oppression and alienation of capitalism, but it also obfuscates, by appearing to discard the embarrassing and virulent content, the alienation of religion. Such irrationalism, inherited by the jargon of authenticity, is like 'the childish

[76] Adorno 1973a, p. 25; Adorno 1965, p. 24.
[77] Adorno 1973a, p. 70; Adorno 1965, p. 60.

manner of Latin primers which praise the love of fatherland in-itself – which praise the *viri patriae amantes*, even when the fatherland in question covers up the most atrocious deeds'.[78] The jargon transposes into capitalism, now raised to a new exponential level, the ideological effect of theology, both of which make attractive something unbearable and disgusting: 'dead cells of religiosity in the midst of the secular, however, become poisonous'.[79]

Adorno's critique of secularised theology leaves wide open the question as to what he wants, what role he sees for theology. If it is not to be secularised, should it be restored to its former glory, or should it undergo a thoroughly dialectical treatment that will take it to places it hardly imagined nor perhaps really wants to go? I will leave that question unanswered for the time being, since what I want to do now is explore what has been lurking beneath my discussion of secularised theology, namely the criticism of idolatry, or the ban on images.

Judaism and the ban on images

Surely the *Bilderverbot* is immediately susceptible to the charge that it is a form of secularised theology, drawing a motif from the Hebrew Bible and raising it to a philosophical leitmotiv? The catch is, as I suggested earlier, that the criticism of secularised theology is part of the whole *Bilderverbot* package, for, in a sense, it relies upon the ban itself. And the ban is a more slippery notion than at first appears, offering a self-criticism of the very process of its emergence. For, at the moment we suspect that what we have here is a secularised theological notion, the ban comes into place, negating such a possibility before it comes into being.

I want to come back to this problem, but first the ban on images: a prohibition on making ['*sh*] any hewn or cut image [*pesel*], it forms the second commandment in Exodus 20: 4 and then Deuteronomy 5: 8. Just to ensure that the ban is comprehensive, the commandment specifies that the image should not be in the form [*temunah*] of anything in the heavens, on earth or in the seas beneath the earth. More importantly, however, it follows the first commandment, 'you shall not have other gods before my face' (Exodus 20: 3; my

[78] Adorno 1973a, p. 21; Adorno 1965, p. 21.
[79] Adorno 1973a, p. 22; Adorno 1965, p. 22.

translation): neither gods in the first nor their images in the second commandment, not even an image of Yahweh. But, in the very proximity of the first and second commandments, a slippage takes place between god and image that will become extremely important in Adorno's own discussion.

But what interests me for now is what Adorno makes of this (and, again, I have supplied some of the background). Well known from *Negative Dialectics* and his thinking on aesthetics, it emerges most clearly in the anti-Semitism section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Thus, in opposition to Enlightenment nominalism:

> In Jewish religion, in which the idea of the patriarchate culminates in the destruction of myth, *the bond between name and being is still recognized in the ban on pronouncing the name of God*. The disenchanted world of Judaism conciliates magic by negating it in the idea of God. Jewish religion allows no word that would alleviate the despair of all that is mortal. It associates hope only with *the prohibition against calling on what is false as God, against invoking the finite as infinite, lies as truth*. The guarantee of salvation lies in the rejection of any belief that would replace it: it is knowledge obtained in the denunciation of illusion.[80]

The echo of Benjamin's argument concerning the language of naming should not be missed here (although Adorno is more interested in the criticism of contemporary linguistic theories of communication),[81] but the implications run into the philosophy of language, theory of knowledge, the nature of myth, and the nature of religion.

But let me exegete the passage a little further, especially the sections I have placed in italics. As for the 'ban on pronouncing the name of God', he picks up the obvious point that the name of God is of course itself an image, especially a graven image, even when one has no other images of wood or stone or metal. Behind this comment lies the point that, in orthodox Jewish practice, one avoids mentioning even the name of God, YHWH (the 'Tetragrammaton'), replacing it with *Hashem*, 'the name'. All in order to ensure that the commandment on banning images is observed.

---

[80] Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 23; Adorno 1971, Volume 3, p. 40; italics added.

[81] See Hohendahl 1997.

But Adorno is hardly one to leave it at that, and so he will push the ban until it becomes 'the prohibition against calling on what is false as God, against invoking the finite as infinite, lies as truth'.[82] Here, the first and second commandments enfold each other, the prohibition on making any hewn or cut image blending into the ban on other gods. At this point, we are clearly in the realm of idolatry: as the image that represents God becomes God (the signifying link having been broken), it then becomes possible to raise up any finite thing – in the heavens or on earth or in the waters beneath the earth – to become a deity. The catch with all of this is that it is a distinct idea of idolatry that emerges only from the Hebrew Bible, especially with its imposition by late scribes of monotheism on earlier texts. Let me take the example of the polemic against idols in Isaiah (40: 19–20; 41: 6–7; 42: 17; 44: 9–20; 45: 16–17 and 46: 1–2, 5–7): here, the political satire operates on the basis that these images could not represent some deity, since that deity or those deities does not or do not exist; therefore, the one who worships his or her god through the image is actually worshipping the image, for there is nothing beyond the image. Thus he or she is a fool. Once this logic is in place, we can then move to the notion that the making of graven images is, in fact, the raising of what is contingent and not God into the place of God. This is what Adorno will not have – finite replacing the infinite, lies instead of truth, falsehood in the place of God, and, as he goes on to write, illusion instead of knowledge and belief in lieu of salvation. It is an extraordinary extension of the second commandment into a philosophical principle, in which a consistent demystification is a given, where one always hesitates to name utopia and hope itself, searching instead for shards in the negative: one must adhere to the 'the commandment not to "depict" utopia or the commandment not to conceive certain utopias in detail'.[83] This is the deepest level at which Jewish thought provides Adorno with a lever outside the tradition of Western philosophy. But what catches my eye is the penultimate point in the list: 'the guarantee of salvation lies in the rejection of any belief that would replace it'.[84] We are back in the realm of grace, but more of that later.

---

[82] Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 23; Adorno 1971, Volume 3, p. 40.
[83] Bloch and Adorno 1988, pp. 10–11.
[84] Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 23; Adorno 1971, Volume 3, p. 40.

Out of myriad possibilities in Adorno's work, let me focus on two instances of the ban on images, both of them drawing upon the criticism of idolatry that lies at its heart: the criticism of Christology and the personality cult, and then the relationship between metaphysics and theology.

As for the criticism of Christology, I have rehearsed this with my criticism of Eagleton earlier in this book, but, here, I can finally lay out the theoretical background. Boldly put, the dialectic of Christology enables the personality cult: only through the logic of the God-human, that is Christ, does it become possible to raise another human being to divine status. In other words, precisely because God becomes a human being in Jesus Christ (if we push the divinity far enough, we end up with the very human Christ and vice versa), can a human being become God – not just Christ, but any human being. I will need to spin this out somewhat, especially in the context of the anti-Semitism section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

The role of Judaism would have to be one of the most enigmatic dimensions of Adorno's work, closely tied up with the ethical, metaphysical and even autobiographical absolute of Auschwitz in his later texts. Of course, the Jews, along with women and nature, are the necessary underside of a Christian Europe, and it is the anti-Semitism chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that indicates the central place of the Jews in Adorno's thought. The chapter itself runs through a number of angles in a search for the reasons and nature of anti-Semitism: class analysis, a ritual outlet of hatred, an economic argument, a psychoanalytic analysis, and the final argument that, under the modern capitalist state in which the individual is absorbed into the machinery of production, anti-Semitism becomes not an individual position but a plank in the platform of bourgeois politics.

Out of all of these items, I am, of course, most interested in the theological analysis. Despite the waning of religious zeal in persecuting the Jews – the motive for almost two millennia – and the consequent playing down of religious dimensions for fascist anti-Semitism, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the vehemence of the denial of religious tradition is one protest too many. Here, they make use of a very similar argument to the one Adorno elaborates in his criticism of secularised theology: anti-Semitism sublates theological factors in favour of cultural ones, but this renders those ideas and positions even more pernicious than when they were more overt. With only the external forms of religion left, with the old authority structures of theology discarded

and the truth of religious claims now forlorn, the longing for a better life is transformed into nationalistic fervour, religious fanaticism finds expression in blood, soil and patriotism, and the hatred of unbelievers is unabated: 'Anti-Semitism is all that the German Christians have retained of the religion of love'.[85]

In the very differences between Christianity and Judaism – one that breeds hatred of the Father by the followers of the Son – lie the theological roots of anti-Semitism. The paradox is that, although Christianity, in New-Testament and Reformation terms that were so influential in Lutheran Germany, marks a shift from the law to a grace that was inherent in the Hebrew covenant, replacing a religion of sin and guilt, of abstract horror and duty, with one of love, it is precisely in Christianity that idolatry comes back with renewed force. And this is where Christology becomes the culprit, particularly in its early formulation at the intersection of Hebrew and Greek thought.

To begin with, Christology is the 'pretense on the part of the finite',[86] the elevation of the tangible, fleshly human Christ to divine status. In Christ, the worship of a human figure receives religious sanction. But this is only the surface of the problem, the first and most obvious step, for the more dialectical point is one that comes straight out of Christology itself: to the same degree that the absolute is humanised, so other human figures may be deified like Christ. What we have here is an inverse ratio: only through the humanisation of the divine in Christ does it become possible to divinise other human beings – dictators, despots, pop-stars and sundry megalomaniacs. The deep dialectic of Christology gives us the logic of the personality cult, for only when Christ is most completely God – as one of the trinity, dwelling in heaven, an all-powerful creator, omniscient, the source of love and so on – only then does his humanity push its way through all the theological categories and claim its presence. So also with his divinity: when the humanity of Christ is dragged to the remotest and most inaccessible point, when it can travel no further and is nature in all of its senses, then the divinity of Christ begins to show up, way past its last deadline. The first step enables the second, which is where the

---

[85] Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 176; Adorno 1971, Volume 3, p. 201. So also: 'The New Testament words, "He who is not for me is against me," lay bare the heart of anti-Semitism down the centuries' (Adorno 1978, p. 131; Adorno 1971, Volume 3, p. 147).

[86] Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 177; Adorno 1971, Volume 3, p. 202.

personality cult picks up the dialectical swing, for only as a human being can Christ become God, which then sets up the possibility for anyone else. The finite stands in for the infinite, the lie for truth, the illusion for knowledge.

The immediate context of this argument is the section on anti-Semitism, particularly the Nazi proclivity for the personality cult of Hitler, but it extends well beyond that analysis to the personality cult that bedevils politics on the Left and Right. But, for now, my criticism moves in a different direction, namely the curious mix of insight and blindness, the exclusions generated by the ban itself of women and nature.

For it is exactly at the points where Adorno can retrieve something, however paradoxically negative it may be, from the Bible and from Judaism, that he closes down other possibilities. As far as women are concerned, he and Horkheimer are the first to argue that women, like the Jews, have been systematically locked out of Western culture and society. In fact, they give as much space to how misogyny is constitutive of this *status quo* as they do to the Jews:

> As with the oppressed aboriginal inhabitants in early national states, or the colonial natives whose organisation and weapons are primitive compared with those of their conquerors, or the Jews among the 'Aryans,' women's defencelessness is the legal title of their oppression.[87]

Notice here the extraordinary conjunction of colonialism, anti-Semitism and misogyny, well before any postcolonial criticism. But – and this why Adorno is so good – theological issues are by no means secondary: such a matrix of oppression finds its ideological justification in the Lutheran emphasis on the Word as the essence of the Gospel that 'equates spiritual freedom with actual oppression'.[88] Deviously, Christianity oppresses women through reverence (Mary), conceals a lurking and compulsive hatred for women through the notion of love for one's neighbour, venerates the Madonna while burning witches, hides a withering scorn in the admiration of beauty.

Adorno and Horheimer trace the bourgeois modes of control through chastity and propriety, cleanliness and appearance, puritan domesticity – all of which generates images of the demure housewife, the prostitute and the

---

[87] Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 110; Adorno 1971, Volume 3, pp. 130–1.
[88] Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 110; Adorno 1971, Volume 3, p. 130.

shrew who enacts her revenge in the tradition of the Fury. If they are uncomfortably sympathetic to Bachofen's untenable thesis of a long-lost and almost forgotten matriarchate, they also look forward to debates that would emerge later, especially in a remarkable passage:

> Women have no personal part in the efficiency on which this civilization is based. It is man has to go out into an unfriendly world, who has to struggle and produce. Woman is not a being in her own right, a subject [*Die Frau ist nicht Subjekt*]. She produces nothing but looks after those who do; she is a living monument to a long-vanished era when the domestic economy was self-contained. The division of labor imposed on her by man brought her little that was worthwhile. She became the embodiment of the biological function, the image of nature, the subjugation of which constituted civilization's title to fame.[89]

If *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has become a central text in German feminism, albeit debated, criticised and developed further,[90] it has also had a profound effect on the Greens, especially in a nation-state where *die Grünen* were one of the first viable environmental political parties. Thus, in the anti-Semitism section, they link anti-Semitism itself with the domination of nature, for one of the contradictions of anti-Semitism is that the Jew is both the agent of the alienation from nature and abject nature itself – as vermin they threaten to undo civilisation itself[91] (witness Nazi propaganda films in which Jews are depicted as rats overrunning Europe in a direct evocation of the black plague). And then, in another first, Adorno and Horkheimer show how women were equated with nature, the realm of animals, and that in the first division of labour along lines of sexual difference women and nature became the objects of domination: the mastery of nature, of the irrational, of the weaker, was realised in conjunction with the domination of women, which is consistent from Plato to the Church. Now the last sentence of my quotation above takes a whole new resonance: 'She became the embodiment of the biological function, the image of nature, the subjugation of which constituted civilization's title to fame'.[92]

---

[89] Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, pp. 247–8; Adorno 1971, Volume 3, p. 285.
[90] See Beinssen-Hesse and Rigby 1996.
[91] Many thanks to Kate Rigby for pointing this out to me (personal communication).
[92] Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 248; Adorno 1971, Volume 3, p. 285.

And yet, despite the extraordinary promise of the conjunction of anti-Semitism, misogyny and the destruction of nature, Adorno and Horkheimer cannot take it any further. Unlike Adorno's dialectical recovery of the ban on images, they cannot work the dialectic so that there is something positive to say about either women or nature, or, indeed, their connection, as both Sigrid Weigel and Andrew Hewitt have suggested, among others.[93] For Kate Rigby, 'their analysis still leaves women (and nature) in the position of the imaginary Other of enlightenment'.[94] And this is contrary to the logic of their own argument: the foundational exclusions of Western thought and society provide another angle, a distinct critique that is both part of the system and yet outside it.

But let me stretch Adorno here, precisely on the question of the ban on images, for it seems to me that the ban itself dialectically includes nature and women as much as the Jews. And this takes place, very much in the spirit of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in the process of reworking the question of reification in light of ban on images – something that I suggested earlier is begging for an analysis in the book. Reification is, of course, the mutual transfer of living relations to things and the rendering of such living relations between human beings and nature as lifeless and objectified. The next step is to connect reification with the ban on images by going back to the root of the ban itself in the critique of idolatry, and, here, I draw in some other biblical texts from Isaiah (40: 19–20; 41: 6–7; 42: 17; 44: 9–20; 45: 16–17 and 46: 1–2, 5–7) where we find a dual critique of idolatry: on a more obvious level, the lifeless object is given a life of its own, while the maker and worshipper transform themselves into lifeless things. For the worshipper can gain life only by submission to the idol which now imparts life. But the critique runs deeper than this, since the idol, at least in the eyes of its makers and worshippers, is meant to represent a god; it is a sensory form that mediates God to the believer. The problem is

---

[93] 'However, when it comes to the history omitted form their text, when it comes to woman's desire for a subject position, and to a speaking position located as it were on the reverse side of enlightenment, it soon becomes tangible how the dialectic is then set in motion in such a way that it is not easy to gain a secure foothold' (Weigel 1996, p. 67). Even though 'Horkheimer and Adorno are aware of the exclusion of women as a condition of possibility of the philosophical discourse within and against which they work…. women are included in this work – somewhat paradoxically – precisely by their exclusion' (Hewitt 1992, p. 147).

[94] Beinssen-Hesse and Rigby 1996, p. 7.

that, when the shaped image gains a life that is not its own, when the symbol becomes an idol, then God becomes fixed as a static, lifeless object in the very form of the idol. Now – and it is a big now – 'God' is, in many respects, shorthand for the other-than-human, conventionally understood as the supra-sensory, supernatural domain beyond human knowledge. But must it not also include all else that is other-than-human, namely the natural world of which human beings are a part and yet engage in a profound process of transformation? This is where the criticism of idolatry gains a whole new dimension, for it applies not only to the conventional senses of 'God' – indelibly stamped with a Greek ontological heritage – but to the whole other-than-human realm as well which very much includes nature and indeed the heavens beyond this particular globe, this third rock from the sun. Thus, in the idol nature itself, the source of the materials from which the idol is made, becomes a static form at the moment the idol takes on a life of its own, that is, nature becomes reified. Let me now go back to the ban on images in Exodus 20/Deuteronomy 5 and recall the phrase that follows the prohibition on graven images: 'whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth' (Exodus 20: 4). From here the images are drawn, the idols constructed, dead objects given life while all that is in the heavens, earth and sea become lifeless things. Idolatry then is also the process of reifying the natural world, of producing an item that becomes an object of worship, of containing, controlling and objectifying that which cannot be contained, controlled and objectified – in short, cannot be rendered a lifeless thing.

Nature has begun to make its way, albeit briefly, into the extraordinarily fruitful notion of the ban on images, but what about women? This is where the work of Christina von Braun[95] whose *Nicht Ich* is one of the most innovative and influential developments of the dialectic of enlightenment, becomes pertinent.[96] Von Braun argues that the domination and displacement of nature through an ever-increasing abstraction (in the simulacrum) began with writing and then by the twentieth century had generated a second-order reality that has completely obliterated material reality. Nature, body and woman no longer 'exist' as such, except as projections of that abstract *logos* that has now become 'flesh'. For von Braun, bodily and fleshly resistance to such a process

[95] Von Braun 1985.
[96] See Beinssen-Hesse and Rigby 1996, pp. 12–13.

has shown up historically in hysteria, the female disease that marks a historical resistance to abstraction, and then anorexia nervosa as the denial of the fake/false/phallic body. What we have here, especially in light of my argument in the preceding paragraph, is a raising of the critique of idolatry and the theory of reification to yet another level. For now the ban becomes both an expression of such a narrative of abstraction *and* a necessary strategy for dealing with it, for what is banned is precisely such an abstraction, such a process of reification and therefore of idolatry. One therefore refuses, bans, the abstract, idolatrous images of nature, woman or body precisely because they no longer have any material reality.

The possibilities of theology

But is there a more positive Adorno? I have already suggested that he exists in various strategies of reading and smaller pieces of written text. In any scan of his pessimistic brilliance, the hints of promise shine all the more brightly in the gloom. I want to return, then, to my concerns of the chapter on Žižek, especially the questions of love and grace, but now with Adorno's own particular cadence. Before I do, however, let me pick up the extraordinary wavering in the Kierkegaard book, the moments when the demolition machinery wavers before theology.

By now, the overall argument of the Kierkegaard study should be clear: theology, in this case the theology of Kierkegaard, is saturated with mythology and paradoxes and therefore constitutes a shaky basis upon which to build a philosophical system. Yet, even in his relentless criticism of Kierkegaard, Adorno vacillates, letting slip occasional hints that have the potential to run elsewhere. These occur at moments of terminological slippage, of alternate modes of expression in which he distinguishes between Christian doctrines and Kierkegaard's transformations:[97] Kierkegaard 'transforms [*wandelt*] the Christian doctrine of reconciliation into the mythical';[98] 'Christ's death is for

[97] A comparable move may be found in the slippage from the 'first mythology' of monotheism to the 'second mythology' of occultism or what we might now dub New Age (see Adorno 1978, pp. 238–44; Adorno 1971, pp. 271–8). For Adorno, the second is far worse than the first, as with the transformation of the profundity of death under Christianity to a comic issue of hygiene (Adorno 1978, pp. 231–3; Adorno 1971, Volume 4, pp. 262–4).

[98] Adorno 1989, p. 110; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 156.

Kierkegaard not so much an act of reconciliation as a propitiatory sacrifice';[99] 'Thus the story is mythically reduced [*schrumpft*] to a sacrifice';[100] 'A border-guard mentality, unchallengeable discipline, the power of fascination – these the deluded Kierkegaard owes not, as he claims, to the purity of his Christian doctrine, but to its mythical reinterpretation [*mythischer Umdeutung*] in the paradox'.[101]

The terms here suggest an alternate path – transform [*abwandeln*], reduce [*schrumpfen*], reinterpretation [*Umdeutung*] – in which Kierkegaard systematically warps theology, producing something that is at best a caricature. Passing comments that they are, they are close to his criticism of secularised theology, particularly the half-baked efforts of liberal theology to render theology relevant. He would rather have theology stand on its own rich tradition, but not for its own sake; rather, he espies another side to theology, for he wishes to submit theology to the same dialectical moves that he applies to everything else, namely that the 'truth-content' of theology must be sought in its dialectical other without which it cannot exist or operate. Yet this truth content can be located only through theology and not be imported from outside; this entails an intense immersion in theology that locates its contradictions and then works through them.

Love

Let me strengthen the flow of these various hints and glimpses, now by revisiting Kierkegaard, or, rather, following Adorno back to Kierkegaard. For some reason, Kierkegaard continues to weigh on Adorno's mind, returning in a little known paper simply called 'Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love', presented at the invitation of Paul Tillich at Union Theological Seminary while Adorno was in exile in the USA.[102] Here, the tension lies between the doctrine of love – and its outcome in reconciliation – and Kierkegaard's radical inwardness. As a profoundly inward category in Kierkegaard's hands, such a notion of love – an inner and universal *agape* that transcends carnal *eros* – could only ground itself on itself. And yet, the catch is that inwardness vitiates any notion of love,

[99] Ibid.
[100] Adorno 1989, p. 111; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 158.
[101] Adorno 1989, p. 119; Adorno 1971, Volume 2, p. 170.
[102] It appeared in Adorno 1939, see Adorno 1971, Volume 2, pp. 217–36.

for the reifications of capitalism – an insight Adorno credits to Kierkegaard – that Kierkegaard sought to overcome through the radical inwardness of the doctrine of love could only become much more vicious the more Kierkegaard withdraws. In other words, the radical retreat from the reification of social relations under capitalism in fact expresses the deepest logic of capitalism itself: the pursuit of one's own personal agenda, the priority of the individual subject over all others, and the subsequent treatment of other human beings as objects of use and exchange, are fundamental if contradictory features of capitalism. Love becomes then a concern for oneself at the expense of others. This forms the first tension of Kirkegaard's doctrine of love: if Kierkegaard attempts to escape reification by retreating inward, desperately attempting to produce an abstract and universal doctrine of love that overcomes reification through reconciliation, then such a doctrine runs up against a subject that is reified in its very act of escape from reification. Further, the doctrine itself is reified, let alone the subject to whom it pertains, based as it is on a reifying and abstracting process.

The second tension is closely related: reification begins with the transference between human social relations and relation between things, namely commodities. According to this logic of transference, the solutions to the problems of capitalism may apparently be found in the living, social relations of commodities rather than in human interaction – market forces, rather than human intervention, provide the resolution. In this respect, Kierkegaard's doctrine of love – in its universalising attempt at reconciliation that is far removed from natural and physical *eros* – is itself a similar ideological mystification characteristic of the process of reification. It produces its own mask, its own ideology that seeks to provide a solution to the depredations of capitalism that can only be a further justification and exacerbation of those same problems. In other words, the ideological effort to overcome the reification produced by capitalism is precisely the means by which reification becomes more pernicious.

Thus, the extreme abstract inwardness of Kierkegaard's doctrine disables love's ability to reconcile both natural tendencies and social relations. Happiness and its historical conditions become impossible: secular injustice remains untouched in a classic pattern that calls for the ideology critique that Adorno saw as one of the abiding strengths of Marxism. In the end, as I noted earlier, Adorno grants Kierkegaard a limited insight into the alienating effects of capitalism and bourgeois society, but his attempted solution only provides an ideology that pre-empted a more advanced form of capitalism.

Adorno's solution, however, is to construct an alternative theory of subjectivity that will lead into the argument of *The Jargon of Authenticity*. And, for Adorno, such a theory requires a properly mediated dialectic between subject and object, between human subjectivity and the historical context in which subjectivity is formed. This avoids the traps of positivist objectivism (subjectivity depends on the facts themselves) and idealist objectivism (innate principles of the mind) that characterises Kierkegaard's system. But I am not sure that this is enough. Adorno refuses to take up the implications of his argument, and, here again, I want to squeeze them out: if Kierkegaard's effort to hold onto the reconciliation at the heart of the doctrine of love fails precisely at the point where he attempts to save it – in the retreat to absolute inwardness – then what does a reconciling love look like? If inwardness is the end of love, then love must be radically collective: only here may reconciliation take place, in a collective love of which we as yet have only shards.

Grace

But love is meaningless, as I suggested in my discussion of Žižek, before grace. If we expect Adorno, like Žižek and Badiou, to seek a thoroughly materialist and political sense of grace, then we will be disappointed, for he has already foreclosed such a possibility with the criticism of secularised theology. Not that Adorno writes all that much about grace, except obliquely, but it bides its time, ready to break the door from its hinges.

So let me pick up, finally, the briefest hint, a single phrase in fact, as a lead into grace. This remarkable moment comes in the anti-Semitism section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where grace as 'undeserved salvation' shows its face. Here is the sentence:

> For Christian anti-Semites, truth is the stumbling-block, truth which resists evil without rationalizing it, and clings to the idea of *undeserved salvation* against all the rules of life and salvation which are supposed to ensure that blessed state.[103]

[103] Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 179; Adorno 1971, Volume 3, p. 204; italics mine. Over against the apparatchiks of the institution who 'rejected this knowledge and persuaded themselves with a heavy conscience that Christianity was their own sure possession' and thereby ended up affirming 'their eternal salvation as against

In other words, only by denying the truth of Christianity can anti-Semitism exist, but what catches my eye in this sentence is the phrase 'undeserved salvation'. In two words, Adorno and Horkheimer capture the essence of grace – something that took Žižek almost three books to identify. As I emphasised in the last chapter, grace concerns what is undeserved, unexpected and comes from completely outside the system – there is nothing that we can do to earn it or bring it about. And this, for Adorno and Horkheimer, runs against what Badiou would call the order of being – the effort to provide some kind of human assurance of salvation through commandments and statutes, earning salvation through good works (the law and ethics), a denial of truth that is the sad story of the institutional claim that salvation comes through doctrinal adherence and correct ritual. What is stunning about this argument is not merely the positive space given to Karl Barth among others but also the equivocation regarding the Christian roots of anti-Semitism. Although Christianity can provide the logic of the personality cult, lead to totalitarian dictatorship and the valorisation of self-denial, it also has within it a truth that denies anti-Semitism. And that truth is the notion of grace.

Conclusion

I hardly need to repeat what I wish to draw from Adorno – theological suspicion and the criticism of secularised theology – and there is little more that I want to write about them here. I have tended to treat them separately, theological suspicion maintaining its vigilance in the arena of theology itself and the criticism of secularised theology ready to cut down any foray outside, any effort to draw theology out of its cosy, fire-lit lounge room full of the memorabilia of millennia. But the two do not always observe the imaginary line that separates them, for theological suspicion may of course also be the suspicion of secularised theology. The swell of yet another wave of political theology today, now concerned with the legacy and possibilities of Paul's epistles in the New Testament, suggests to me that we dispense with both elements of Adorno's approach at our own peril. Indeed, this resurrection of political theology renders both items extremely relevant today. One response

---

the worldly damnation of all those who did not make the dull sacrifice of reason' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997, p. 179; Adorno 1971, Volume 3, p. 203).

is to dive in to the debates, searching for a viable political direction when all other possibilities seem to have withered, absorbed yet again by capitalism. Badiou may want a militant Paul of materialist grace, Žižek may desire a Paul of political love, and then finally of grace as well, and Agamben may wish for the remnant in Paul's work, the continual process of dividing across accepted divisions. Or we may take a stand against all of this and search for a thoroughly de-theologised politics, a call that Moreiras makes in response to Badiou and Žižek,[104] or that Albrecht Wellmer makes in seeking to root out the last theological residue in Adorno's work.[105]

It seems to me, however, that another possibility emerges from Adorno's criticism, but, before I comment on that, let me return for a moment to the unrelenting negative side of what I have described as his vacillation, his thorough demolition job on Kierkegaard. Recall for a moment the double move, from demythologising to history and then alternatively paradox. At this point, Adorno felt that he had Kierkegaard's system disintegrating under its unbearable tensions, the result of a failed dialectic. Somewhat later, in the lectures on metaphysics, Adorno points out that such a strategy has its flaws:

> in general, one does not understand philosophy by eliminating contradictions, or by chalking up contradictions against authors – there is no significant philosophical author who could not be convicted of this or that contradiction. One understands a philosophy by seeking its truth content precisely at the point where it becomes entangled in so-called contradictions.[106]

What are the implications of this quotation for my reading of Adorno? To begin with, I have explored that other side of his own work, the perpetual fascination with theology that would lead to some extraordinary glimpses of another dimension he himself refused to explore. And so, drawing out the logic of his arguments, I dared to make a run with such items as faith and love (a collective reading that takes off from the criticism of Kierkegaard's radical

---

[104] Moreiras 2004.

[105] Wellmer argues that Adorno's reliance in the notions of reconciliation and utopia are theological and metaphysical pieces in his work and need to be eradicated. He suggests taking up Adorno's notion of the sublime in order to locate the liberating force of linguistic meaning in the context of intersubjective relations rather than the redemption of an alienated nature. See Wellmer 1997. See also Wellmer 1990, pp. 41–2.

[106] Adorno 2000, p. 53.

inwardness), and particularly with grace in relation to nature and myth. Of course, now I may appear to have transgressed, to have returned to theology and left myself wide open for Adorno's theological suspicion.

However, like Adorno, I do not want to hold, however surreptitiously, onto an impossible pristine theology, nor, indeed, to search for some new mode of secularised theology that will rescue us from our political predicaments. Rather, I want to ask what Adorno in fact means by stating that theology, and indeed philosophy, must seek 'its truth content precisely at the point where it becomes entangled in so-called contradictions'.[107] My suggestion, or answer, to this problem, is that theology must be allowed, or perhaps encouraged, to run its dialectical course. And this path is one that has been overwhelming in nearly all of the critics I have discussed in this book, namely from theology to politics. But what if we take this dialectical track to its logical end, moving all the way through the political to see what theology looks like at the other end?

[107] Adorno 2000, p. 53.

Conclusion

I will keep my conclusion brief, since this book has been primarily a work of commentary. I set out with the modest task of investigating and subjecting to critique the role of theology and the Bible in the thought of some of the key Western Marxists of the twentieth century. In some cases, this work was more known than others – Benjamin and, more recently, Žižek have generated significant debate in this respect – but, in others, it has lain quietly in a corner. To my surprise in many cases, the engagements with theology and the Bible are long and deep in this material, often structuring some of the central elements of their thought. Thus Bloch's theory of myth and hermeneutics of utopia are impossible without the Bible and theology, as is Benjamin's fragmentary theory of history, Adorno's *Bilderverbot*, Althusser's theory of ideology, Gramsci's universalism and the organic intellectual, Lefebvre's passion, Eagleton's liking for intrinsic categories and the possibility of Žižek being a political writer at all, and the permeating presence of Roman Catholicism in the catholicity of Althusser, Lefebvre, Gramsci and Eagleton.

In each case, I have had some problems, such as Bloch and Benjamin's tendency to allow theology to dominate their readings of the Bible, the suppression of Roman-Catholic backgrounds in Althusser and Lefebvre, Eagleton's troubled christology, Žižek's blending of grace and love, and Adorno's role as

gatekeeper of utopia. But I am, in the end, far more interested in the crucial ideas and categories that emerged from my commentary. Bloch's strategy of the discernment of myth, when it works well, has been far too neglected and needs to be oiled and put to use once again. His political exegesis of sacred texts also has much to offer. Benjamin's unwitting insight into the role of myth in speaking about utopia is something to which I want to return.[1] The opening up of the possibility of a materialist philosophy of religion in terms of ideology, myth, everyday life, space and ecumenical political organisation emerges most strongly in the work of Althusser, Lefebvre and Gramsci. Although I was less enthusiastic about Eagleton's contribution, his emphasis on political forgiveness should not be forgotten. Žižek's belated discovery, via Badiou, of the inherently political nature of grace is vital for left politics, it seems to me. But, above all, Adorno's theological suspicion and criticism of secularised theology have taken my fancy.

Indeed, theological suspicion poses some urgent questions to the others I have discussed in this book, and with that I would like to close this discussion. Apart from Adorno, they all make the move from theology to politics, or, as it is sometimes put, they seek to secularise theology (for Adorno's theological suspicion cannot, in the end, be separated from his criticism of secularised theology). Adorno directed his criticism at Heidegger and existentialism, as well as liberal theology, but it applies just as well to most of the characters that have turned up in this book. Gramsci is, by and large, beyond this criticism, for he seeks insights from the Church, especially its politics and history, for the Left. Only his enthusiasm for the Protestant Reformation falls under Adorno's criticism, for he valorises it too uncritically as a model for moral and political reform. As for the rest, we may distinguish between those who, like Eagleton, Žižek and Bloch, make an explicit effort to secularise theology, and others for whom theology turns up as unexpected guest, precisely because they reject it. Here we find Althusser, Lefebvre and Benjamin.

The first three are quite explicit: their agenda is to use theological terms in a materialist register. Eagleton thinks the Left should learn some valuable lessons from theology and the Church, whether these are christology, Christian virtues or forgiveness. Žižek at various points argues for the viability of love,

[1] See Boer 2006.

ethics and grace. And Bloch attempts a wholesale recovery of a spate of theological ideas. In each case, the question that hangs low over their work is whether it is indeed possible to empty such terms entirely of their theological content and reload them in a political sense. More importantly, however, is the question of assumed authority structures for such terms. At least with the Church, this is somewhat out in the open – they serve the Church's agenda of preservation at least, if not expansion. Secularised Christology, however, falls prey to the logic of the personality cult, while the virtues Eagleton espouses – he lists variously humility, modesty, meekness, vision, courage, dedication, loyalty, selflessness and endurance – fall prey to the question, humility, loyalty etc. for whom? And for what purpose? Indeed, the very same question applies to Žižek's wayward emphasis on love. For when those in positions of authority and power – traditionally the apparatchiks of the Church – urge the faithful to love one another irrespective of class, creed, gender or race, is this actually a strategy for obscuring the differences of class and gender and so on? As long as we love one another with Christian love, everything will be fine. Bloch's effort to appropriate theological terms is even more comprehensive that that of Eagleton. By the time we get to the close of *The Principle of Hope*, we find that teleology, transcendence, faith, hope, evil, sin and death all make an appearance. Except for his openness on the question of death, I found this part of Bloch's work less than appealing. It was really his biblical criticism, especially the discernment of myth and political exegesis that worked much better. The advantage, of course, is that biblical studies is by no means a theological discipline, that biblical studies is inherently secular, as Bloch himself argued so well.

In the cases of Althusser, Lefebvre and Benjamin, secularised theology has a more pernicious presence. It is, in many respects, an absent cause of their thought. For Althusser and Lefebvre, the dismissal of and polemic against theology and the Church indicates a far more pervasive presence than they would care to admit. I would rather that Althusser had openly admitted that his theory of ideology rests heavily on theology, for then he would have been able to deal with it face-on rather than find it had crept into the closing pages of his ideological state apparatus essay. In the end, his theory shares a little too much with the theology he sought to banish. Lefebvre, for his part, has just too much a liking for heresies for it not to derive from his time in the Church. Heterodox Marxism is not all that different from heterodox Christianity. It is

not for nothing that, in both cases, I found unwitting insights and developed both the possibility of and categories for a materialist theory of religion. In Althusser's case, it was the logical possibility itself along with the categories of ideology and myth, whereas, with Lefebvre, I traced the possibilities in terms of space, everyday life and women. And I did this by reading against their own explicit agendas. The difference is that I sought to speak of religion directly by means of some of their key categories rather than banishing it from the discussion. Finally, Benjamin makes use of a theory of history derived from theology and the Bible to counter tendencies in both liberalism and Marxism that he saw as baleful. Here, the problems are a little different, for Benjamin was both explicit and coy about his use of biblical and theological categories. So it is not for nothing that I found, in the midst of his failed effort to break out of the mythic hell of capitalism, a way of using myth to do precisely that. But we also need to ask, in respect to Benjamin's appropriation of an anagogic theory of history, whose history this is and why the Church developed such a history. It is, of course, a narrative of the Church triumphant at the close of history. But who takes the place of the Church, or indeed of God, when the concept is secularised?

But what, then, of the ideas I have gleaned from their work? Do they not too fall under a theological suspicion? Some of them are by now less suspect – the discernment of myth since it comes from Bloch's study of the Bible, the unwitting contributions of Benjamin, Althusser and Lefebvre because they are applied directly to religion and not only politics, and, of course, the notion of theological suspicion itself. But what of a materialist grace or political forgiveness, or indeed a materialist theory of evil – precisely those I found valuable? These must face the full glare of theological suspicion, for the agenda is quite explicitly an effort to rework theology for politics, to empty the terms of their theological content and rework them as the basis of political reflection.

Theological suspicion also touches directly on the new wave of contemporary debate over neo-Paulinism or the political theology of Paul with which my chapter on Žižek is something of an engagement. Into the flurry of this debate, which has no signs of abating or being resolved, come Giorgio Agamben, Eagleton in his own way, Jacob Taubes's posthumously published seminar on Paul's political theology, and most recently the essay by Alberto Moreiras.[2] At the heart of this debate lies the famous assertion by Carl Schmitt that 'all

[2] Agamben 2005, Taubes 2004, Moreiras 2004.

significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological concepts'.[3] That the conservative Schmitt would go on to elaborate the idea of the exception in jurisprudence as 'analogous to the miracle in theology'[4] is also well known, but Schmitt did, well before the current wave, identify the problem of secularised theology, albeit with a very different agenda.

Let me suggest, then, that we need to take up another element of Adorno here, and that is none other that the dialectic. Adorno, of course, argued that we ought to let the dialectic have its head and seek the truth content of theology by this means. This would mean that the move from theology to politics is but the first step of such a dialectic. It succeeds in showing the deeply political nature of many of the categories discussed in this book. But it is only the first step. Rather, we take the move from theology to politics all the way, push it through to its dialectical extreme. And, in doing so, we would end with theology: not a going back to theology as Schmitt argued, but a theology beyond the initial opposition, one that is the next step, thoroughly politicised and materialised.

What we will end up with then is not merely a political theology, as Eagleton once sought in his days with *Slant*, or as the liberation theologians continue to do. Their agenda has been to bring together Christian theology and Marxism, whether the metaphor is one of dialogue, mutual insight, antagonism or the demarcation of spheres of competence (the one is better for analysing social and political systems, the other more adept with questions of transcendence and salvation). Instead, as Žižek has suggested, but has not, to my mind, carried through, it is only through a thorough materialisation, through the full materialist move, that the possibility of theology begins to emerge.

[3] Schmitt 2005, p. 36.
[4] Schmitt 2005, p. 36.

References

Adorno, Theodor W. 1939, 'Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love', *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 8: 413–32.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1963, *Prismen: Kulturkritik Und Gesellschaft,* München: Deutscher Taschenbuch.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1969, *Stichworte. Kritische Modelle 2,* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1971, *Gesammelte Schriften,* edited by R. Tiedemann, 23 vols., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1973a, *The Jargon of Authenticity,* translated by K. Tarnowski and Frederic Will, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1973b, *Negative Dialectics*, New York: Seabury Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1978, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, translated by E.F.N. Jephcott, London: Verso.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1981 [1967], *Prisms*, translated by S. Weber, Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1984, 'The Idea of Natural History', *Telos,* 60: 111–24.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1989, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic,* translated by R. Hullot-Kentor, Vol. 61, Theory and History of Literature, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1991, *Notes on Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1994, *Briefe und Briefwechsel,* edited by H. Lonitz, 1. Aufl. ed, *Theodor W. Adorno; Bd. 1*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Adorno, Theodor W. 1998, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords,* New York: Columbia University Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. 2000, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems,* translated by E. Jephcott, edited by R. Tiedemann, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Adorno, Theodor W. and Horkheimer, Max 1997, *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* London: Verso.

Adorno, Theodor W. and Benjamin, Walter 1999, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940,* translated by N. Walker, edited by H. Lonitz, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

Adorno, Theodor W., Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertholt Brecht, and Georg Lukács 1977, *Aesthetics and Politics,* translated by R. Taylor, London: Verso.

Agamben, Giorgio 2005, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, translated by P. Dailey. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Albiac, Gabriel (ed.) 1997, *Lire Althusser aujourd'hui*, Paris: L'Harmattan.

Althusser, Louis (as Robert Leclos) 1946, 'En attendant le blé américain, Rome sommeille', *Témoignage chrétien,* 10 and 17 May.

Althusser, Louis 1946, 'Review of Georges Izard's *L'homme et révolutionnaire*', *Dieu Vivant,* 6: 149–52.

Althusser, Louis 1959, *Montesquieu, la politique et l'histoire*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France.

Althusser, Louis 1969a, 'Crise de l'homme et de la société', *Lumière et Vie,* 93: 26–9.

Althusser, Louis 1969b, *For Marx,* translated by B. Brewster, London: Allen Lane.

Althusser, Louis 1969c, *Lénine et la philosophie,* Paris: François Maspero.

Althusser, Louis 1972, *Politics and History: Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel and Marx,* translated by B. Brewster, London: NLB.
Althusser, Louis 1990, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays,* translated by B. Brewster et al., edited by G. Elliott, London: Verso.
Althusser, Louis 1992, *L'avenir dure longtemps; suivi de, Les faits,* edited by O. Corpet and Y. Moulier Boutang, Paris: Stock/IMEC.
Althusser, Louis 1994a, *Écrits philosophiques et politiques. Tome 1,* Paris: Éditions Stock/IMEC.
Althusser, Louis 1994b, *The Future Lasts Forever,* translated by R. Veasey, edited by O. Corpet, and Y.M. Boutang, London: Vintage.
Althusser, Louis 1996, *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan,* edited by O. Corpet, and F. Matheron, New York: Columbia University Press.
Althusser, Louis 1997, *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings,* translated by G.M. Goshgarian, London: Verso.
Althusser, Louis and Étienne Balibar 1970, *Reading 'Capital',* London: NLB.
Anderson, Bernhard W 1984, *Creation in the Old Testament,* London: SPCK.
Badiou, Alain 2003, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism,* translated by R. Brassier, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Balfour, Ian 1991, 'Reversal, Quotation (Benjamin's History)', *MLN,* 106: 622–47.
Barrett, Michèle 1991, *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault,* Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Baudrillard, Jean 1975, *The Mirror of Production,* translated by M. Poster, New York: Telos Press.
Beinssen-Hesse, Silke and Kate Rigby 1996, *Out of the Shadows: Contemporary German Feminism,* Carlton South: Melbourne University Press.
Benjamin, Andrew 2000, 'Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, edited by A. Benjamin and P. Osborne, Manchester: Clinamen Press.
Benjamin, Walter 1972, *Gesammelte Schriften,* edited by R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser, 15 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
Benjamin, Walter 1973, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Vapitalism,* London: NLB.
Benjamin, Walter 1992, *Illuminations,* edited by H. Zohn and H. Arendt, London: Fontana Press.
Benjamin, Walter 1996, *Selected Writings. Volume 1: 1912–1926,* edited by M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA.: Belknap.
Benjamin, Walter 1998, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* London: Verso.
Benjamin, Walter 1999a, *The Arcades Project,* edited by R. Tiedemann, Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press.
Benjamin, Walter 1999b, *Selected Writings. Volume 2: 1927–1934,* translated by R. Livingstone and others, edited by M. Jennings, H. Eiland and G. Smith, Cambridge, MA.: Belknap.
Bloch, Ernst 1968, 'Man as Possibility', *Cross Currents,* 18: 282–3.
Bloch, Ernst 1969, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution,* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
Bloch, Ernst 1970, *Man on His Own: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion,* translated by E.B. Ashton, New York: Herder and Herder.
Bloch, Ernst 1972, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom,* translated by J.T. Swann, New York: Herder and Herder.
Bloch, Ernst 1985, *Werkausgabe,* 16 volumes, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
Bloch, Ernst 1986, *Natural Law and Human Dignity. Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.
Bloch, Ernst 1988, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays,* Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.
Bloch, Ernst 1991, *Heritage of Our Times,* Cambridge: Polity Press.
Bloch, Ernst 1995, *Principle of Hope*, Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.
Bloch, Ernst 1998, *Literary Essays,* translated by A. Joron and others. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bloch, Ernst 2000, *The Spirit of Utopia*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Bloch, Ernst and Theodor W. Adorno 1988, 'Something's Missing: A Discussion Between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing', in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, translated and edited by J. Zipes and F. Mecklenburg, Cambridge, MA.: MIT.
Blondel, Maurice 1984, *Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice,* translated by O. Blanchette, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
Boer, Roland 1996, *Jameson and Jeroboam,* Atlanta: Scholars Press.
Boer, Roland 1998, 'Second Isaiah: Biblical Theology and Historical Materialism', *Biblical Interpretation,* 6/2: 181–204.
Boer, Roland 2000, 'Banality and Sacrifice', in *Strange Fire: Reading the Bible After the Holocaust*, edited by T. Linafelt, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
Boer, Roland 2003, *Marxist Criticism of the Bible,* London: Continuum.
Boer, Roland 2007, 'On Fables and Truths', *Angelaki* 11, 2: 107–16.
Boff, Leonardo and Clodovis Boff 1987, *Introducing Liberation Theology,* Turnbridge Wells: Burns & Oates.
Boyer, Robert 1990, *The Regulation School: A Critical Introduction,* translated by C. Charney, New York: Columbia University Press.
Breton, Stanislas 1993, 'Althusser aujourd'hui', *Archives de la philosophie*, July–September: 417–30.
Britt, Brian 1996, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible,* New York: Continuum.
Brooks, Peter 2000, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Buck-Morss, Susan 1977, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute,* New York: The Free Press.
Buck-Morss, Susan 1989, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.
Buck-Morss, Susan 1995, 'The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe', *October*, 73: 3–26.
Bultmann Rudolph 1951 [1941], 'Neues Testament und Mythologie: Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung', in *Kerygma und Mythos*, edited by H.W. Bartsch, Hamburg: Herbert Reich-Evangelischer Verlag.
Bultmann, Rudolph 1952, *Theology of the New Testament*, Volume 1, London: SCM.
Bultmann, Rudolph 1984, 'New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation', in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, edited by S.M. Ogden, Philadelphia: Fortress.
Callinicos, Alex 1976, *Althusser's Marxism,* London: Pluto Press.
Capps, Walter 1968a, 'An Assessment of the Theological Side of the School of Hope', *Cross Currents,* 18: 319–36.
Capps, Walter 1968b, 'The Hope Tendency', *Cross Currents,* 18: 257–72.
Caygill, Howard 1998, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience,* London: Routledge.
Chow, Rey 1989, 'Walter Benjamin's Love Affair with Death', *New German Critique,* 48: 63–86.
Clarke, Simon, Terry Lovell, Kevin McDonnell, Kevin Robins and Victor Seidler 1980, *One-Dimensional Marxism: Althusser and the Politics of Culture*, London: Allison & Busby.
Cohen, Margaret 1993, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
Cohen, Margaret 1995, 'The City as Dreamworld and Catastrophe', *October*, 73: 5–26.
Copjec, Joan (ed.) 1996, *Radical Evil*, London: Verso.
Cowan, Bainard 1981, 'Walter Benjamin's Theory of Allegory', *New German Critique,* 22: 109–22.
Cox, Harvey 1968, 'Ernst Bloch and the Pull of the Future', *New Theology*, 5: 191–203.
Curtis, D.E. 1997, *The French Popular Front and the Catholic Discovery of Marx,* Hull: University of Hull Press.
Davidson, H.R. Ellis 1964, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe,* Harmondsworth: Pelican.
Davies, Philip 1992, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

De Vries, Hent 1992, 'Anti-Babel: The "Mystical Postulate" in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida', *MLN,* 107: 441–77.
Eagleton, Terry 1966a, *The New Left Church,* London: Sheed and Ward.
Eagleton, Terry 1967a, 'Why We Are Still in the Church', *Slant,* 3, 2: 25–8.
Eagleton, Terry 1967b, 'The Slant Symposium', *Slant,* 3, 5: 8–9.
Eagleton, Terry 1968a, 'Politics and the Sacred', *Slant,* 4, 2: 18–23.
Eagleton, Terry 1968b, 'Language, Reality and the Eucharist (1)', *Slant,* 4, 3: 18–23.
Eagleton, Terry 1968c, 'Language, Reality and the Eucharist (2)', *Slant,* 4, 4: 26–31.
Eagleton, Terry 1968d, 'Anti-Medicine', *Slant,* 4, 4: 32.
Eagleton, Terry 1969, 'Priesthood and Leninism', *Slant,* 5, 4: 12–17.
Eagleton, Terry 1970, *The Body as Language: Outline of a 'New Left' Theology,* London: Sheed and Ward.
Eagleton, Terry 1976, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory,* London: New Left Books.
Eagleton, Terry 1981, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism,* London: Verso.
Eagleton, Terry 1986, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975–1985,* London: Verso.
Eagleton, Terry 1996, *Literary Theory: An Introduction,* Oxford: Blackwell.
Eagleton, Terry 1997, *Saint Oscar and Other Plays,* Oxford: Blackwell.
Eagleton, Terry 2001, *The Gatekeeper: A Memoir,* London: Penguin.
Eagleton, Terry 2003a, *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Zizek and Others,* London: Verso.
Eagleton, Terry 2003b, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic,* Oxford: Blackwell.
Eagleton, Terry and Adrian Cunningham 1966, 'Christians Against Capitalism', in *'Slant Manifesto': Catholics and the Left*, edited by A. Cunningham, T. Eagleton, B. Wicker, M. Redfern and L. Bright, London: Sheed and Ward.
Eagleton, Terry and Brian Wicker (eds.) 1968, *From Culture to Revolution: The 'Slant' Symposium 1967*, London: Sheed and Ward.
Ebach, Jürgen 1982, 'Der Blick des Engels. Für eine "Benjaminische" Lectüre der hebräischen Bibel', in *Walter Benjamin: Profane Erleuchtung und Rettende Kritik*, edited by R. Faber and N.W. Bolz, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.
Elliott, Gregory 1987, *Althusser: The Detour of Theory,* London: Verso.
Fenves, Peter 1996, 'The Genesis of Judgment', in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, edited by D.S. Ferris, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Fiorenza, Frances P. 1968a, 'Dialectical Theology and Hope I', *Heythrop Journal,* 9: 143–63.
Fiorenza, Frances P. 1968b, 'Dialectical Theology and Hope II', *Heythrop Journal,* 9: 384–99.
Fiorenza, Frances P. 1969, 'Dialectical Theology and Hope III', *Heythrop Journal,* 10: 26–42.
Fontana, Benedetto 1993, *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation Between Gramsci and Machiavelli,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Geoghegan, Vincent 1996, *Ernst Bloch,* London: Routledge.
Geulen, Eva 1996, 'Towards a Genealogy of Gender in Walter Benjamin's Writing', *The German Quarterly,* 69: 161–80.
Geyer-Ryan, Helga 1988, 'Counterfactual Artefacts: Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History', in *Visions and Blueprints: Avant-Garde Culture and Radical Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Europe*, edited by E. Timms and P. Collier, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Geyer-Ryan, Helga 1992, 'Effects of Abjection in the Texts of Walter Benjamin', *MLN,* 107: 499–520.
Gilloch, Graeme 1997, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City,* Cambridge: Polity.
Gilloch, Graeme 2002, *Walter Benjamin – Critical Constellations,* Cambridge: Polity.
Goldmann, Lucien 1964, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine,* translated by P. Thody, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Gramsci, Antonio 1957, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings,* translated by L. Marks, New York: International Publishers.
Gramsci, Antonio 1992, *Prison Notebooks vol 1,* translated by J.A. Buttigieg and A. Callari, edited by L.D. Kritzman and R. Wolin, Vol. 1, New York: Columbia University Press. [Original edition, *Quaderni del carcere*, 1975.]
Gramsci, Antonio 1994a, *Antonio Gramsci: Pre-Prison Writings,* translated by V. Cox, edited by R. Bellamy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Gramsci, Antonio 1994b, *Letters from Prison,* translated by R. Rosenthal, edited by F. Rosengarten, 2 vols., New York: Columbia University Press.
Gramsci, Antonio 1995, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* translated by D. Boothman, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Gramsci, Antonio 1996, *Prison Notebooks vol 2,* translated by J.A. Buttigieg, edited by L.D. Kritzman, Vol 2, New York: Columbia University Press. [Original edition, *Quaderni del carcere*, 1975.]
Gramsci, Antonio and Quintin Hoare 1978, *Selections from Political Writings (1921–1926),* New York: International Publishers.
Gutiérrez, Gustavo 1969, *Theology of Liberation,* Maryknoll: Orbis.
Gutiérrez, Gustavo 1983, *The Power of the Poor in History,* Maryknoll: Orbis.
Habermas, Jürgen 1979, 'Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin', *New German Critique,* 17: 30–59.
Hanssen, Beatrice 1998, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels,* Berkeley: University of California Press.
Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri 2000, *Empire,* Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
Hegel, G.W.F. 1971, *Hegel's Theological Writings,* edited by T.M. Knox and R. Kroner. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
Hegel, G.W.F. 1984, *Three Essays,* South Bend: Notre Dame University Press.
Heinitz, Kenneth 1968, 'The Theology of Hope According to Ernst Bloch', *Dialog,* 7: 34–41.
Hewitt, Andrew 1992, 'A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment?', *New German Critique,* 56: 143–70.
Hohendahl, Peter Uwe 1995, *Prismatic Thought: Theordor W. Adorno,* Lincoln, NA.: University of Nebraska Press.
Hohendahl, Peter Uwe 1997, 'Adorno: the Discourse of Philosophy and the Problem of Language', in *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, edited by M. Pensky, Albany: State University Press of New York.
Hudson, Wayne 1982, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch,* London: Macmillan.
Hullot-Kentor, Robert 1989a, 'Back to Adorno', *Telos,* 81: 3–30.
Hullot-Kentor, Robert 1989b, 'Foreword: Critique of the Organic', forward to T.W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Hullot-Kentor, Robert 1992, 'Notes on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: Translating the Odysseus Essay', *New German Critique,* 56: 101–8.
Jameson, Fredric 1971, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature,* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Jameson, Fredric 1981, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Jameson, Fredric 1990, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic,* London: Verso.
Janz, Rolf-Peter 1983, 'Mythos und Moderne bei Walter Benjamin', in *Mythos und Moderne: Begriff und Bild einer Rekonstruktion*, edited by K.H. Bohrer, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
Jarvis, Simon 1998, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction,* New York: Routledge.
Jay, Martin 1984, *Adorno,* Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
Jennings, Michael William 1987, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Johnson, Douglas 1994, 'Introduction: Louis Althusser 1918–1990', in Althusser 1994b.

Jones, John Miller 1995, *Assembling (Post)modernism: The Utopian Philosophy of Ernst Bloch,* New York: Peter Lang.
Kaser, Kurt 1927, *Riforma e controriforma,* Florence: Vallecchi.
Kellner, Douglas 1997, 'Ernst Bloch, Utopia, and Ideology Critique', in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, edited by J.O. Daniel and T. Moylan, London: Verso.
Kierkegaard, Søren 1962, *Works of Love*, translated and edited by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, New York: Harper & Row.
Kierkegaard, Søren 1980, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, translated and edited by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Kierkegaard, Søren 1983, *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, translated and edited by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Kierkegaard, Søren 1985, *Philosophical Fragments: Johannes Climacus*, translated and edited by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Kierkegaard, Søren 1991, *Practice in Christianity*, translated and edited by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Kierkegaard, Søren 1992, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to 'Philosophical Fragments'*, translated and edited by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Kierkegaard, Søren 1995, *Samlede Værker*, edited by A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg, and H.O. Lange, 19 volumes, Copenhagen: Gyldendals Bogklubber.
Lacan, Jacques 1992, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,* Vol. VII, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, translated by D. Porter, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, London: Routledge.
Lacan, Jacques 1994, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* Vol. X, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, translated by A. Sheridan, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Lacroix, Jean 1950, *Marxisme, existentialisme, personnalisme,* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
Landy, Francis 1999, 'Seraphim and Poetic Process', in *The Labour of Reading: Desire, Alienation and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by F. Black, R. Boer and E. Runions, Atlanta: SBL Publications.
Lefebvre, Henri 1926a, 'La Pensée et l'esprit', *L'Esprit,* 1: 21–69.
Lefebvre, Henri 1926b, 'Description de ces temps. Misère de M. Jacques Maritain', *L'Esprit,* 1: 258–71.
Lefebvre, Henri 1927a, 'Notes pour le procès de la chrétienté', *L'Esprit,* 2: 121–38.
Lefebvre, Henri 1927b, 'Reconnaissance de l'unique', *L'Esprit,* 2: 5–37.
Lefebvre, Henri 1971, *Everyday Life in the Modern World,* translated by S. Rabinovitch, London: Allen Lane.
Lefebvre, Henri 1989 [1959], *La somme et le reste,* Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck.
Lefebvre, Henri 1991, *Critique of Everyday Life,* Volume 1, translated by J. Moore, London: Verso.
Lefebvre, Henri 1995, *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes, September 1959–May 1961,* translated by J. Moore, London: Verso.
Lefebvre, Henri and Norbert Guterman 1936, *La Conscience mystifiée*, Paris: Gallimard.
Lefebvre, Henri and Norbert Guterman (eds.) 1934, *Karl Marx: Morceaux choisis*, Paris: Gallimard.
Leslie, Esther 2000, *Walter Benjamin: Overcoming Conformity,* London: Pluto Press.
Levy, Ze'ev 1997, 'Utopia and Reality in the Philosophy of Ernst Bloch', in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, edited by J.O. Daniel and T. Moylan, London: Verso.
Luther, Martin and Desiderius Erasmus 1969, *Luther and Erasmus: On the Bondage of the Will and On the Freedom of the Will,* Vol. 17, 'Library of Christian Classics', edited by E.G. Rupp and P.S. Watson, London: SCM.
Machiavelli, Niccolò 1988, *The Prince*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Majumbar, Margaret A. 1995, *Althusser and the End of Leninism?,* London: Pluto Press.
Marin, Louis 1984, *Utopics: Spatial Play,* translated by R.A. Vollrath, London: Macmillan.
Marx, Karl 1975 [1843], *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Volume 3, London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Matheron, François 1997, 'Introduction', in Althusser 1997.
McCall, Tom 1996, 'Momentary Violence', in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, edited by D.S. Ferris, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
McCole, John 1993, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition,* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Mehring, Franz 1928, 'Karl Marx und das Gleichnis', in *Karl Marx als Denker, Mensch, und Revolutionör*, edited by D. Rjazanov, Vienna: Verlag für Literatur und Politik.
Menninghaus, Winfried 1991, 'Walter Benjamin's Theory of Myth', in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, edited by G. Smith, Cambridge, MA.: MIT.
Metz, Johannes B. 1968a, 'God before Us Instead of a Theological Argument', *Cross Currents,* 18: 295–306.
Metz, Johannes B. 1968b, 'Hoping and Planning', *Cross Currents,* 18: 307–19.
Metz, Johannes B. 1969, *Theology of the World,* London: Burns and Oates.
Metz, Johannes B. 1976, 'The Responsibility of Hope', *Philosophy Today,* 10: 280–8.
Metz, Johannes B. 1980, *Faith in History and Society,* London: Burns and Oates.
Milbank, John 1993, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason,* Oxford: Blackwell.
Moltmann, Jürgen 1968, 'Hope and Confidence: A Conversation with Ernst Bloch', *Dialog,* 7: 42–55.
Moltmann, Jürgen 1982, *The Crucified God*, London: SCM.
Montag, Warren 1995, ' "The Soul is the Prison of the Body": Althusser and Foucault, 1970–1975', *Yale French Studies,* 88: 53–77.
Moore, Stephen D. 1997, 'The Quest for the New Historicist Jesus', *Biblical Interpretation,* 5, 4: 438–64.
Moreiras, Alberto 2004, 'Children of Light: Neo-Paulinism and the Cathexis of Difference', *The Bible and Critical Theory*, 1, 1: 1–16.
Mosès, Stéphane 1995, 'Benjamin's Metaphors of Origin: Names, Ideas, Stars', in *Jewish Writers, German Literature: The Uneasy Examples of Nelly Sachs and Walter Benjamin*, edited by T. Bahti and M.S. Fries, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
Moulier Boutang, Yann 1992, *Louis Althusser: Une biographie, Vol. 1: La formation du mythe, 1918–1956.* Paris: Grasset.
Moylan, Tom 1997, 'Bloch Against Bloch: The Theological Reception of Das Prinzip Hoffnung and the Liberation of the Utopian Function', in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, edited by J.O. Daniel and T. Moylan, London: Verso.
Müller, Harro 1996, 'Walter Benjamin's Critique of Historicism: A Rereading', *The Germanic Review* 71: 243–52.
Münster, Arno 1985, 'Ernst Bloch: une esthétique de l'anticipation', *Revue d'esthétique* 8: 161–72.
Nägele, Rainer (ed.) 1988, *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
Pannenberg, Wolfhart 1968, 'The God of Hope', *Cross Currents,* 18: 283–94.
Pensky, Max 1993, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning,* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
Pensky, Max 1996, 'Tactics of Remembrance: Proust, Surrealism, and the Origin of the Passagenwerk', in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, edited by M.P. Steinberg, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Pepper, Thomas 1995, 'Kneel and You Will Believe', *Yale French Studies,* 88: 27–41.
Philip, André 1927, *Le Problème ouvrier aux Etats-Unis,* Paris: Alcan.
Pizer, John 1989, 'Goethe's "Urphänomenon" and Benjamin's "Ursprung": A Reconsideration', *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies,* 25: 205–22.
Pizer, John 1995, 'Reconstellating the Shards of the Text: On Walter Benjamin's German/Jewish Memory', *German Studies Review,* 18: 275–90.
Rabinbach, Anson 1985, 'Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism', *New German Critique,* 34: 78–124.
Rancière, Jacques 1996, 'The Archaeomodern Turn', in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, edited by M.P. Steinberg, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Rauch, Angelika 1988, 'The Trauerspiel of the Prostituted Body, or Woman as Allegory of Modernity', *Cultural Critique*, 10: 77–88.
Raulet, Gérard 1983, 'Subversive Hermeneutik des *Atheismus im Christentum*', in *Seminar: Zur Philosophie Ernst Blochs*, edited by B. Schmidt, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
Ricoeur, Paul 1994, 'Althusser's Theory of Ideology', in *Althusser: A Critical Reader*, edited by G. Elliott, Oxford: Blackwell.
Roberts, Richard H 1987, 'Review Article: An Introductory Reading of Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*', *Journal of Literature and Theology*, 1, 1: 89–112.
Rochlitz, Rainer 1996, *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin,* translated by J.M. Todd, New York: Guildford.
Rühle, Otto 1943 [1928], *Karl Marx: His Life and Work,* translated by Eden and Cedar Paul, New York: New Home Library.
Rumpf, Michael 1991, *Aporien und Apologie: Zue Kritik an Walter Benjamin und seiner Rezeption,* Cuxhaven: Junghans.
Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. 1992, *The Empty Garden: The Subject of the Late Milton,* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
Schmitt, Carl 2005 [1985], *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty,* translated by G. Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Scholem, Gershom 1981, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship,* translated by H. Zohn, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America.
Scholem, Gershom 1983, *Walter Benjamin und sein Engel: Vierzehn Aufsätze und kleine Beiträge,* edited by R. Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
Scholem, Gershom (ed.) 1992, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem: 1932–1940*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
Segundo, Juan Luis 1976, *The Liberation of Theology,* Maryknoll: Orbis.
Shields, Rob 1999, *Lefebvre, Love and Struggle: Spatial Dialectics,* London: Routledge.
Steinberg, Michael P. 1996, 'The Collector as Allegorist: Goods, Gods and the Objects of History', in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, edited by M.P. Steinberg, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Stoljar, Margaret Mahony 1996, 'Sirens of Gaslight and Odalisques of the Oil Lamp: The Language of Desire in the *Arcades Project*', in *With the Sharpened Axe of Reason: Approaches to Walter Benjamin*, edited by in G. Fischer, Oxford: Berg.
Taubes, Jacob 2004, *The Political Theology of Paul,* translated by D. Hollander, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Thompson, Edward P. 1993, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Tiedemann, Rolf 1989, 'Historical Materialism or Political Messianism? An Interpretation of the Theses "On the Concept of History"', in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, edited by G. Smith, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Tiedemann, Rolf 1991, 'Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk*', in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, edited by G. Smith, Cambridge, MA.: MIT.
Tillich, Paul 1965, 'The Right to Hope', *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie,* 7: 371–7.
Ullmann, Wolfgang 1992, 'Walter Benjamin und die jüdische Theologie', in *Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her: Texte zu Walter Benjamin*, edited by M. Opitz and E. Wizisla, Leipzig: Reclam-Verlag.
von Braun, Christina 1985, *NICHT ICH: Logik, Lüge, Libido,* Frankfurt am Main: Neue Kritik.
von Buelow, Christiane 1989, 'Troping Toward Truth: Recontextualizing the Metaphors of Science and History in Benjamin's Kafka Fragment', *New German Critique,* 48: 109–34.
Weber, Samuel M. 1991, 'Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's Origin of the German Mourning Play', *MLN,* 106: 465–500.
Weigel, Sigrid 1996, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin,* London: Routledge.

Wellmer, Albrect 1990, 'Metaphysics at the Moment of its Fall', in *Literary Theory Today*, edited by P. Collier and H. Geyer–Ryan, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Wellmer, Albrect 1997, 'Adorno, Modernity, and the Sublime', in *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, edited by M. Pensky, Albany: State University Press of New York.
Wohlfarth, Irving 1978, 'On the Messianic Structure of Benjamin's Last Reflection', *Glyph,* 3: 168–85.
Wohlfarth, Irving 1981, 'Sur quelques motifs juifs chez Benjamin', *Revue d'Esthétique,* 1: 141–62.
Wohlfarth, Irving 1997, 'Walter Benjamin and the "German-Jewish Parnassus"', *New German Critique,* 70: 3–86.
Wolff, Janet 1989, 'The Invisible Flaneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity', in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, edited by A. Benjamin, London: Routledge.
Wolin, Richard 1982, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetics of Redemption,* New York: Columbia University Press.
Zipes, Jack 1992, 'The Messianic Power of Fantasy in the Bible', in *Fantasy and the Bible,* edited by G. Aichele and T. Pippin, Atlanta: Scholar's Press.
Žižek, Slavoj 1999, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology,* London: Verso.
Žižek, Slavoj 2000, *The Fragile Absolute, or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, London: Verso.
Žižek, Slavoj 2001, *On Belief,* London: Routledge.
Žižek, Slavoj 2003, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity. Short circuits*, Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.
Žižek, Slavoj, Judith Butler, and Ernesto Laclau 2002, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left,* London: Verso.

Index of Biblical References

Genesis
1 46
1: 1 146
1: 4, 10, 12 22
1: 26 146
1: 26–31 88
1: 1–2: 3 88
1–3 86 n. 104, 87, 89, 143, 146, 149
2: 3–7 42
2: 3–25 88
2: 9 150–1
2: 16–17 150–1
2: 20 89
2: 22–3 89
2–3 68, 89, 184
3 39, 41–3, 151, 153
3: 1–3 150
3: 1–24 149
3: 3 150–1
3: 4–5 41
3: 7 42
3: 8–19 42
3: 8–24 42 n. 102
3: 16 151
3: 19 145, 149, 151
3: 22 41–2, 151
4 39, 41–3, 89
4: 6–7 43
4: 8 43
4: 11–12 44
4: 14 44
4: 15 44
4: 16 44
4–10 89
5 89
6–9 89
10 89
10: 5, 20, 31 89
11 39, 87, 89
22 317, 319
32 39

Exodus
3: 14 39 n. 93
4: 2–5 42
4: 24–6 39
6: 8–12 42
20 115, 394, 438
20: 3 430–1
20: 4 9 n. 18, 322, 430, 438

Leviticus
19: 32 9 n. 18

Numbers
12 19
16 21, 101
21: 4–9 42

Deuteronomy
5 115, 394, 438
5: 8 322, 430

2 Kings
18: 4 43

Job
31: 26–7 7

Psalms
22 306
127: 2 9 n. 18

Ecclesiastes
1: 9 9 n. 18

Isaiah
1 319
2: 4 11 n. 26
40: 19–20 432, 437
41: 6–7 432, 437
42: 17 432, 437
44: 9–20 432, 437
45: 16–17 432, 437
46: 1–2, 5–7 432, 437

51: 11 8
55: 1 11
58: 7 291 n. 36

Daniel
5: 27 9 n. 18

Amos
5 319

Micah
4: 3–4 11 n. 26

Matthew
5–7 127
6: 11 9 n. 18
6: 19–21 10
7: 9 126
7: 15 116
7: 21 116
10: 34–9 362 n. 55
21: 28–31 384
24 115
24: 26 116 n. 31
25: 1–13 9 n. 18
25: 35–6 291
27: 46 306

Mark
13: 21–3 116 n. 31
13: 22 115
15: 34 306

Luke
1: 53 311
12: 14 8–9
14: 26 362–3, 367–8, 385
14: 33 363
14: 34 9 n. 18
21 115
23: 34 338 n. 3

John
1: 1 9 n. 18
3: 3 203
3: 14 43
3: 15 43

Romans
3: 27–30 375
4 318 n. 106
5: 2 375 n. 89
5: 5 49
6: 4–9 373
6: 14 372
7 344, 351, 357, 368
7: 4–6 353
7: 5 366
7: 7 290, 357–8, 366, 368
7: 7–11 357
7: 15–18 357
7: 7–24 351–2
8: 18 49
10: 4 111
12: 1 243
13: 10 385 n. 113

1 Corinthians
2: 9 49
4: 13 353
13 292, 359, 367–70, 375
13: 13 374
15: 51–2 8

2 Corinthians
5: 16–17 371

Galatians
2: 16 376
3: 28 225, 368

Ephesians
4: 13 49

Hebrews
9: 11 320 n. 112
9: 12 320
13: 14 8

1 John
5: 19 12

Revelation
12–13 9 n. 18
21: 5 9 n. 18
21: 23 51

General Index

Aaron 100
Abel 39, 41, 43–4, 89
Abraham 111, 148, 317–19
Adam 9 n. 18, 41–2, 46–7, 68, 75, 86–9, 93, 150–2, 184, 404–6
Adorno, Theodor xii, xiii, xv, xvi–xvii, xix, xxii, xxiii–xxiv, 7, 27–8, 30, 31, 34 n. 74, 51, 52, 53 n. 130, 53 n. 131, 55–6, 58–9, 66, 69, 76, 80–1, 115, 117, 130–1, 142, 152, 154, 157, 221, 281, 288, 295, 306, 322–4, 376, 383, 391–445, 447–8, 451
The Dialectic of Enlightenment (with Max Horkheimer) xiii, 322–3, 394, 413 n. 43, 431–8, 442–3
The Jargon of Authenticity 394, 399, 423–30, 442
Kierkegaard xix, xxiii–xxiv, 80–1, 392–421, 439–42, 444–5
'Kierkegaard's Doctrine of Love' 393, 395, 440–2
Negative Dialectics xii, 423, 427, 431
'Something's Missing' (with Ernst Bloch) 52–3, 55–6, 432
Agamben, Giorgio 99, 387, 444, 450
Albiac, Gabriel 136–7 n. 82, 160 n. 123
Alienation 10, 12, 75, 118–19, 123, 126, 144–5, 147–50, 152–8, 163–6, 171, 173, 175–6, 178–9, 184, 186, 193, 199–200, 202–3, 207, 209–10, 212, 280, 295 n. 47, 299–300, 309–10, 407, 423, 426–7, 429, 436, 441, 444 n. 105
Allegory xix–xx, 2 n. 3, 15, 57–8, 62–76, 78–80, 86, 94, 96–8, 103–5, 168, 205, 271
Althusser, Hélène 159
Althusser, Louis xii, xv, xvi, xviii, xx–xxi, 27, 107–62, 163–4, 172–5, 184, 192, 201, 215–16, 220, 228–9, 231, 249–50, 258, 274, 275, 277, 278, 310 n. 88, 329, 332, 343, 346 n. 20, 447–50
'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' xvi, 119–20, 132–41, 346 n. 20
'The International of Decent Feelings' 110, 112–18, 120, 126
Letter to Jean Lacroix 110, 123–7, 136
Masters thesis on Hegel 110–12, 127, 143–58
'A Matter of Fact' 110, 112, 117–22, 126
'On Conjugal Obscenity' 110, 112, 121–3, 310 n. 88
Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists xvi, 107, 109, 128, 131–2, 134–5, 142
Anderson, Bernhard 103 n. 160
Anselm (St.) 56, 189, 328
Apocalypse 22–3, 29, 94
Apocalyptic 100, 291
Apocalypticism 38, 45–7, 112–15, 313
Aquinas, Thomas (St.) 8 n. 17, 119, 146
Aristotle 51, 119, 401
Arminius 361
Arnold, Matthew 325
Asceticism 40, 275, 277, 284–7, 295, 301–2, 304, 308, 321, 323, 393, 396
Ashton, E.B. xii
Atheism 3–4, 6, 13, 24, 33, 36, 40, 47–50, 52–4, 127, 176, 217, 236, 275, 376, 422 n. 58
Avicebron 51
Augustine (St.) 1, 23, 28–9, 119, 220, 426
Autobiography 109, 137 n. 82, 159–62, 164, 166, 194, 205, 275, 433
Autotelism xxii, 147, 293, 324, 327–8, 330, 333

Babel 19, 37 n. 81, 39, 41, 87, 89
Bachofen, Johann J. 436
Badiou, Alain xvi, xxiii, 289 n. 30, 291, 302, 336–8, 340, 343–60, 363–4, 366–77, 380–3, 387–9, 403, 442–4, 448
Balfour, Ian 99 n. 152
Balibar, Étienne 215 n. 2
Balzac, Honoré de 78, 263
Barrett, Michèle 136 n. 82
Barth, Karl 28–9, 31, 34–5, 60 n. 11, 172, 443
Barthes, Roland 309
Baudelaire, Charles 58 n. 3, 63, 74–5, 78–9

Baudrillard, Jean 150
Beinssen-Hesse, Silke 436 n. 90, 437 n. 94, 438 n. 96
Bellarmino, Roberto 261
Benjamin, Walter xii–xiii, xv, xvii, xviii, xix–xx, 3, 27, 29, 36, 57–105, 117, 126, 154, 157, 184, 282, 301, 363, 387, 393 n. 5, 394, 397, 399, 401, 408, 421 n. 56, 422 n. 58, 431, 447–50
The Arcades Project xvii, 58 n. 3, 60, 62–3, 70–84, 86, 94, 96–8, 103
'On Language as Such and the Language of Man' xvii, 86–90, 97, 431
'On the Philosophy of History' xvii, 60, 82–4, 94–5, 97–8, 99 n. 152
The Origin of the German Mourning Play xvii, 61–9, 80, 86, 91, 96–8, 101–2
'The Task of the Translator' xvii, 84–5, 97
Bergson, Henri 191
Bernstein, Basil 309
Birth xx, 37, 42, 48, 62, 83–6, 90–5, 122, 144, 151–3, 172, 188, 201, 223, 386, 428
Blake, William 291, 297, 300
Bloch, Ernst xii, xv–xix, 1–56, 57, 61, 103, 104, 117, 126, 127, 180–1, 184, 189–91, 193, 198, 214, 276, 283, 302, 363, 403, 432 n. 83, 447–50
Atheism in Christianity xii–xiii, xvi, xix, 1–7, 11, 13–26, 29–32, 34–7, 39–40, 43–55, 127
The Principle of Hope xix, 3, 7–12, 23, 37–9, 45–7, 55
'Something's Missing' (with Theodor Adorno) 52–3, 55–6, 432
Blondel, Maurice 164, 188–92, 194, 198
Bobbio, Noberto 287
Boer, Roland xviii n. 1, 63 n. 23, 143 n. 94, 148 n. 97, 317 n. 104, 373 n. 82, 448 n. 1
Boff, Clodovis 298
Boff, Leonardo 298
Bossuet, Jacques–Bénigne 112
Bourgeoisie 5, 20, 35, 72–3, 79, 86–8, 90, 108, 133, 165, 180, 182–3, 194, 212–13, 229–31, 242, 249–51, 258, 260, 396, 403, 407–8, 433, 435, 441
Boutang, Moulier 161 n. 126
Boyer, Robert 273 n. 136
Brahmabandhav, Upadhyaya 222–3
Brahms, Johannes 8, 10
Brecht, Bertolt 60, 256, 380, 397 n. 17
Breton, André 160 n. 120
Bright, Lawrence 332–3
Britt, Brian 59 n. 9
Brooks, Peter 296
Buber, Martin 423, 425
Buck–Morss, Susan 60 n. 11, 61, 67 n. 40, 69 n. 44, 70, 82 n. 89, 98 n. 146, 102 n. 158, 392 n. 2, 422 n. 58
Budde, Karl 38 n. 87
Buddha 45, 368
Bukharin, Nikolai 58 n. 3
Bultmann, Rudolph 28–35, 368–9, 399
Buonaiuti, Ernesto 236
Butler, Judith xxiii, 335, 338–44, 355–7, 365, 367
Buttigieg, Joseph 218

Cain 19, 39, 41–4, 89
Calvez, Jean–Yves 160
Calvin, John 3 n. 7, 147, 188, 190, 195, 216, 218, 243, 258–9, 264–6, 297, 361
Callinicos, Alex 107 n. 4
Camus, Albert 112, 115, 281
Capps, Walter 2 n. 2
Caputo, John xviii
Cassirer, Ernst 309 n. 85
Castro, Fidel 322
Catholic Action xxi, 115, 120–2, 159, 175, 217, 228–34, 236, 238–9, 242, 245–6, 252, 256
Caveing, Maurice 159
Caygill, Howard 102 n. 157
Chesneaux, Jean 159
Chow, Rey 93 n. 130
Christology xxii, 45–6, 64, 111, 125, 277, 283, 291, 296, 299, 301–11, 313, 315–24, 327, 330, 363, 377, 400–1, 409–12, 425, 433–4, 447–9
Church fathers 42–3, 172
Clarke, Simon 107 n. 4
Class xvii, xxii, 5, 9, 14–15, 20–2, 31, 36, 42, 56, 108–9, 113–17, 126, 131, 133, 142, 154, 163, 181–2, 206–7, 218, 229, 231, 237–40, 244, 246–59, 269–70, 278, 284, 288, 307, 309, 312, 326, 330–1, 339, 342, 433, 449
Clinton, Bill 381
Cohen, Hermann 30 n. 63, 35, 101
Cohen, Margaret 82 n. 89
Commodification 75, 94, 185
Commodity 70–1, 73–6, 79, 202–3, 262, 295, 365, 407, 441
Confession xv, 127, 135, 139–40, 200, 226, 267, 295–300, 308, 321
Conversion 171, 193, 217, 222–8, 299, 335–7, 343, 348
Copjec, Jean 287 n. 24
Cowan, Bainard 67 n. 37
Cox, Harvey 1, 2 n. 2
Creation xx, 22–3, 29, 34, 65, 80, 86, 87,

88–9, 92–4, 96, 101–4, 134, 143–56, 158, 266, 280, 287, 289, 293–4, 301, 324–5, 371, 388, 398 n. 17, 401
Croce, Benedetto 91, 256, 268, 271 n. 128
Crossan, Jon Dominic 313–14
Curtis, D.E. 175 n. 30

Daniélou, Jean 175–6
David (King) 99
Davidson, H.R. Ellis 413 n. 44
Davies, Philip 18 n. 38
de Certeau, Michel 167
Death 7–8, 37–8, 41, 47, 52–4, 64–5, 68, 92, 112–13, 152, 171–2, 188, 196, 201, 208, 266, 280, 287, 302–6, 311, 313–23, 330, 332, 344–5, 350–4, 376, 386, 401, 404, 410, 425–6, 429, 439, 449
Deconstruction 59, 342
de Lubac, Henri 175–6
de Man, Paul 59 n. 10, 84 n. 96
Derrida, Jacques xviii, 99
Descartes, René 129
Determinism 73, 141, 145, 190, 194–6
Devil 78, 100, 187, 197–8, 199, 287–8, 294, 303, 320, 324, 399, 402
de Vries, Hent 90 n. 117
Dickens, Charles 330
Dollimore, Jonathan 278
Dostoevsky, Fyodor 281
Douglas, Mary 313

Eagleton, Terry xv–xvi, xviii, xx, xxii, 12, 59 n. 6, 228, 275–333, 336–7, 348, 355, 433, 447–50
The Body as Language xvi, xxii, 276–7, 279–80, 286–7, 290, 292, 295, 299, 307–13, 316–17, 329–33
Figures of Dissent xxii, 276, 278–9, 283–5, 287–9, 292, 296–8, 300–1, 304, 315, 325–6
The Gatekeeper xxii, 275–6, 279, 295–7, 300, 302–4, 306–7, 311, 314–15, 332–3
The New Left Church xvi, xxii, 276, 279–81, 299–300, 303, 308–9, 329–30
Sweet Violence xxii, 276, 279, 281–2, 286–7, 289–93, 299–307, 311–13, 315–23, 327–8, 332
Ebach, Jürgen 90 n. 119
Ecclesiology xx–xxi, 110, 117, 121, 127, 134–36, 143, 163, 218, 235, 243, 249, 253, 255, 272, 277–8, 282, 324, 326, 328–31, 391
Ecumenism xxi, 174, 197, 215–28, 245–6, 273–4, 448
Eden 7, 9 n. 18, 29, 37–8, 41–2, 68, 87–9, 93, 149–51, 184
Elijah 100
Eliot, George 281
Eliot, T.S. 281, 318 n. 107
Elliott, Gregory 107 n. 4
Elohim 24, 39, 41–2
Engels, Friedrich 32, 130 n. 66, 142, 339
Enlightenment 5, 32, 48, 172, 276, 324, 422, 431, 437–8
Erasmus, Desiderius 361, 387
Eschatology xx, 10, 31, 34–5, 51, 62, 67–8, 80, 84–7, 92, 95–6, 99–104, 152, 277, 284, 286, 301, 313, 370
Ethics xvii–xviii, xx, xxiii, 35, 40, 79, 108, 135, 254, 265, 271 n. 128, 291, 294, 313, 318, 320–1, 323, 324, 327, 335, 337, 353–4, 356, 358–60, 362–4, 371–2, 379–85, 389, 416–21, 433, 443, 449
Eucharist 43, 64, 170, 177–8, 187, 277, 280, 285, 300, 308–11, 316–17, 320, 329
Eve 9 n. 18, 41–2, 68, 88–9, 93, 144, 150–3, 184
Event 115–16, 230, 314, 336–7, 343–50, 353–9, 363, 368, 372–4, 376, 381–2, 388–9, 404–5
Everyday life xxi, 113, 164–5, 185–7, 194, 199, 200–4, 209, 212–13, 216, 228, 245, 274, 345, 350, 448, 450
Evil 11, 39, 41–2, 52, 58, 69, 87, 100, 142, 149–51, 184, 196, 199, 287–95, 297–8, 301, 303, 307–8, 311, 321, 324, 327–8, 352, 410–11, 427, 429, 442, 449–50
Existentialism 27, 30–2, 403, 407, 423–9, 448
Exodus 7, 9 n. 18, 13, 21–3, 35, 38–41, 44–5, 47, 49
Ezra 17–19, 26

Faith 14, 31, 45, 52, 65, 69, 98, 111, 120, 127–8, 130, 160, 163, 174–6, 191–3, 204 n. 95, 212–13, 226, 232, 235, 247, 265, 276, 280, 306, 318–19, 321, 328, 344, 347, 349, 354, 368 n. 72, 370, 372, 374–5, 379–80, 382, 386, 396, 401–2, 417–18, 444, 449
Fall 8 n. 17, 22, 31, 34, 37, 43, 62, 67–9, 86–90, 101–3, 144–5, 147–9, 151–2, 184–5, 289–90, 295, 331, 394, 400–1, 411–12
Fascism 27, 79, 236, 237, 241, 252–4, 272–3, 426–7, 433
Feminism 6, 25, 93, 121, 152, 283, 292, 313, 392, 436
Fenves, Peter 87 n. 110
Fessard, Gaston 175–6
Fetishism 70–1, 73, 79, 202–4, 261–2, 309

Feuerbach, Ludwig 8–9 n. 18, 48, 172–3
Fiorenza, Frances P. 2 n. 2
Flood 22, 89
Fontana, Benedetto 256 n. 87, 268, 270, 271 n. 126
Free will 58, 141, 190, 194, 196, 317, 361, 387, 418
Freud, Sigmund 129 n. 65, 133, 262, 289, 342, 353, 378
Funk, Robert 313

Galileo Galilei 129, 260–1
Gandhi, Mahatma 222
Gender 26, 62, 92–4, 148, 206, 209–13, 351 n. 35, 449
Geoghegan, Vincent 2 n. 3, 23, 54
Geulen, Eva 92–4
Geyer–Ryan, Helga 93 n. 132, 101 n. 156
Gilloch, Graeme 101 n. 156, 103 n. 162
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von xix, 2, 9, 11, 92 n. 123, 96
Golding, William 281
Goldman, Emma 322
Goldmann, Lucien 195
Gotthelf, Jeremias 10
Grace xvi–xviii, xxiii–xxiv, 189–90, 192, 194–5, 200, 261, 263–6, 291, 297, 300, 308, 325, 335–8, 347–52, 358–62, 364, 367–79, 381–3, 387–9, 393–6, 400, 409–10, 418, 420, 432, 434, 439, 442–5, 447, 448–9, 450
Gramsci, Antonio xii–xiii, xv–xvi, xviii, xx–xxi, 117, 174, 215–74, 275, 286, 326, 342, 447–8
Prison Notebooks vol. 1 xii, xvi, xxi, 218, 221, 226, 230, 232, 236, 240, 243, 245–8, 257, 265–6
Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks xii, xvi, xxi, 215–8, 223–5, 228–43, 250–6, 259–65, 267, 271–3
Prison Notebooks vol. 2 xii, xvi, xxi, 216–22, 226–9, 232, 236, 238, 241–5, 248, 250–6, 259–60, 263, 268–9, 272
Grandville 79
Greene, Graham 281
Guevara, Che 321–2, 385
Guitton, Jean 159–62
Gunkel, Hermann 19
Guterman, Norbert 175–6, 186 n. 51, 188
Gutiérrez, Gustavo 2, 298

Habermas, Jürgen 59 n. 7, 104 n. 163, 391 n. 1, 422 n. 58
Hall, Stuart 284
Hanssen, Beatrice 69 nn. 43–4, 97 n. 140, 101 n. 156, 422 n. 58
Hardt, Michael 273
Hawthorne, Nathaniel 281, 305
Hebel, Johann Peter 10
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich 24, 50, 53 n. 131, 110–12, 127, 129–31, 136, 145, 148, 150, 153, 158, 164, 179, 183, 185, 192, 241 n. 54, 307, 339, 341, 350, 378, 401, 403, 414–15, 417, 423
Hegemony 133 n. 71, 224, 231, 234, 238–9, 245, 268–73, 326, 339–41, 360
Heidegger, Martin 27–8, 30, 349, 423–6, 448
Heiler, Friedrich 220–1
Heinitz, Kenneth 2 n. 2
Heresy 19, 42, 50, 164, 174, 187–98, 200, 219, 222, 235, 248, 265, 274, 297, 449
Hewitt, Andrew 437
Hinkelammert, Franz 2
Hippolytus 42
Historical Jesus 25, 35, 46, 303, 309, 310, 313–15, 321, 323, 348
Hoare, Quintin 245, 257 n. 89, 268 n. 119, 274 n. 137
Hohendahl, Peter U. 392 n. 2, 431 n. 81
Holy Spirit/Holy Ghost 29, 171, 180, 187–8, 192–4, 196
Holtzmann, Heinrich 46
Homer 66
Hope 10, 23, 38, 49–50, 52, 75, 101, 113, 117–18, 127, 172–3, 195, 203, 307, 322, 328, 332, 370, 374–6, 382, 421, 429, 431–2, 449
Horkheimer, Max 152, 281, 288, 323, 393 n. 5, 433, 435–7, 443
Hours, Joseph (Père) 159–61
Hudson, Wayne 2 n. 3, 24 n. 56
Hugo, Victor 78
Hullot–Kentor, Robert xii–xiii, 392–3

Ibsen, Henrik 281
Iconoclasm (ban on images) xxiii, 9 n. 18, 378, 393–4, 415, 422–3, 430–3, 435, 437–9
Idealism 24, 91, 108–9, 130, 256 n. 87, 268, 307, 309, 403–4, 407, 410, 413–14, 416, 424, 442
Ideology xvi–xvii, 6, 27, 31, 47, 52, 109, 117–120, 122, 128–9, 131–43, 148, 154, 157, 172–3, 175, 192, 199, 209, 217 n. 3, 224, 226, 228, 231, 234–5, 237–8, 243, 248–9, 261, 269–70, 326, 329, 341–3, 346 n. 20, 365, 383, 394, 398 n. 18, 399, 403, 407–8, 423–30, 435, 441, 447–50
Idolatry 56, 74, 115–17, 142, 236 n. 43, 295, 322–4, 426, 430–4, 437–9
Ignatius of Loyola (St.) 229
Inglis, K.S. 330

Intellectuals xxi–xxii, 142–3, 159, 161, 163, 216–18, 222–7, 238–9, 245–59, 261, 267, 270, 275, 283, 327, 447
Interpellation 132–3, 136–41, 346 n. 20
Irenaeus 42
Irigaray, Luce 193, 289, 297
Isaac 317–19
Ishmael 319

Jacobi, Friedrich 309
James, Henry 281, 325
Jameson, Fredric 2 n. 3, 7, 12, 55, 63 n. 23, 167, 204, 275 n. 1, 279, 283, 340, 392 n. 2, 422 n. 58
Jansen, Cornelius Otto 188, 190, 194–7, 198, 265
Janz, Rolf–Peter 79 n. 80
Jarvis, Simon 392 n. 2
Jaspers 423–4
Jay, Martin 392 n. 2
Jennings, Michael W. 61 n. 20
Jeremias, Alfred 38 n. 87
Jesus Christ xiii, xx, 8–9, 13, 17, 21, 23, 25, 29, 31, 35, 38, 42, 43, 45–7, 49, 62, 64, 65, 68, 69, 95, 100, 102, 111, 116, 140, 180, 188, 196, 203, 211–12, 220–1, 225, 231, 265–6, 280–1, 301–10, 312–23, 335–6, 346–8, 350, 353, 362–4, 367–9, 372–3, 378, 382, 384–6, 398 n. 17, 399–401, 404, 409–13, 420, 428, 433–5, 439
Joachim of Fiore 1, 5, 23, 188, 192–4, 198
Jobling, David 149
Johnson, Douglas 160
Jones, John Miller 2 n. 3
Joseph 207
Joyce, James 325

Kabbalism 61
Kafka, Franz 282
Kant, Immanuel 110–12, 130, 287 n. 24, 354, 401, 416
Kaser, Kurt 265 n. 114
Kellner, Douglas 27 n. 59
Kierkegaard, Søren xix, xxiii–xxiv, 28, 31, 69 n. 43, 80–1, 130, 212–13, 318, 368, 373, 380, 383–7, 392–421, 423–6, 428, 439–42, 444
King, Stephen 367, 371
Knox, John 216
Koestler, Arthur 116
Kraus, Karl 87
Kristeva, Julia 93 n. 132

Labour (work) 20, 36, 38, 42, 73, 122, 141, 144–5, 147–56, 158, 160, 202, 206–7, 250, 269, 429, 436
Lacan, Jacques xxiii, 109 n. 8, 148, 197, 282, 287 n. 24, 289–91, 297, 318, 335–43, 349–50, 352–60, 363, 365–9, 371–2, 379–80, 382, 384, 388–90
Laclau, Ernesto xxiii, 335, 338–43, 356–7, 365, 367
Lacroix, Jean 110, 123–7, 136, 159
Lamennais, Hughes F.R. de 230
Landy, Francis 43 n. 105
Language 26, 33, 36, 62, 67–8, 73, 82, 84–90, 94, 97, 103 n. 162, 104–5, 126, 156–7, 169, 177, 280, 290–1, 295, 308–10, 346, 397, 406, 416, 424, 426, 429, 431
Law xxiii, 8 n. 17, 9, 17, 19, 34, 39, 60, 87, 101, 102, 111, 119, 123, 125, 139–40, 144, 148–50, 192–3, 196, 254, 265, 270–2, 289–92, 320, 327, 335–7, 344–5, 348, 350–5, 357–62, 366–72, 374–9, 381, 383–4, 416, 429, 434, 443
Lawrence, D.H. 325
Lazzaretti, David 259
Leavis, F.R. 325
Lefebvre, Henri xi–xiii, xv–xvi, xviii, xx–xxi, 163–214, 215–16, 220, 228, 235, 265, 274, 275, 277, 283, 394, 447–50
Introduction to Modernity 181–3, 191, 195–8, 205
'Notes Written One Sunday in the French Countryside' 163–180, 182–9, 192, 194, 199–214
Lenin, Vladimir 6, 107, 129–31, 136, 221, 245, 321–2, 330, 336–7, 340, 343, 349, 377, 379–83, 385, 389–90
Leslie, Esther 59 n. 6, 82 n. 89, 93 n. 131
Lévi-Strauss, Claude 157, 200, 309 n. 85
Levy, Ze'ev 2 n. 4
Lieb, Fritz 60 n. 11
Liberal theology 2, 40, 160, 423, 425, 428–9, 440, 448
Liberation theology xvii–xviii, 2, 6, 26, 31, 46, 118, 160, 256, 277, 287 n. 24, 298, 308, 314, 331, 451
Lilly, A. Leslie 236
Loisy, Alfred 190, 235
Lonitz, Henri 58 n. 3, 399 n. 21, 421 n. 56
Love xvii, xxiii–xxiv, 11, 34, 45, 47, 93–4, 111, 127, 139–40, 143, 146–7, 168, 191 n. 69, 281, 291–2, 302, 316, 327–8, 335, 337, 344–5, 347, 349–50, 353, 357–60, 366–72, 374–7, 382–5, 389, 395–6, 420, 434, 435, 439, 440–2, 444, 447, 448–9
Lukács, Georg 31, 166, 204, 229, 279
Lumpenproletariat 313
Luther, Martin 3 n. 7, 20, 218, 258, 265, 267–8, 355, 361, 387, 418
Luxemburg, Rosa 322

Machiavelli, Niccolò 218, 260–1, 267–73
Maimonides 30 n. 63
Majumbar, Margaret 109–10 n. 9
Mallarmé, Stéphane 309
Malraux, André 115–16
Mani 45
Mann, Thomas 282, 292
Marcel, Gabriel 112
Marcuse, Herbert 297
Marin, Louis 157–8
Marion, Jean–Luc xviii
Marx, Karl xxi, 2, 6, 8 n. 18, 9–10, 24, 51, 53 n. 131, 54, 70–5, 79, 107, 119, 129–31, 142, 144–5, 147–8, 150, 152–4, 156, 158, 160, 163–4, 173, 175–6, 187–8, 196, 200, 212–13, 217, 262, 263–4, 269, 298, 307, 309, 312, 322, 335, 337 n. 2, 339–41, 343, 365, 380, 403, 422
Mary 8 n. 17, 9 n. 18, 74, 171, 188, 212–13, 435
Matheron, François 121 n. 49, 159 n. 114, 160 n. 120
Mauriac, François 112, 116
Maurras, Charles 236
McCabe, Herbert 302
McCall, Tom 101
McCole, John 58 n. 2, 61, 82 n. 89, 92 n. 123, 101–2
McLuhan, Marshall 309
Mehring, Franz 74 n. 59
Meister Eckhart 5
Melville, Herman 281
Menninghaus, Winfried 103–4 n. 162
Merleau–Ponty, Maurice 309
Messiah 37, 46, 58, 95, 99–101, 378
Messianism xxii, 35–6, 49, 60, 83–5, 97–102, 387
Metaphysics 27–8, 58, 74–5, 90, 199, 204 n. 95, 400 n. 22, 423, 425, 427–8, 433, 444
Metz, Johann Baptist xvii, xviii, 2 n. 2, 5, 46
Milbank, John xviii, 279 n. 9
Miller, Arthur 281
Milner, Andrew 279, 284 n. 46, 332
Milton, John 316, 327
Moltmann, Jürgen xvii, 1–2, 34, 45–6
Montag, Warren 134 nn. 74–5, 135 n. 79, 136 n. 82
Montesquieu 125, 128
Montuclard, Maurice 160
Moore, Stephen D. 314 n. 97
Moreiras, Alberto 444, 450
Morrison, Toni 367
Moses 38–40, 42–5, 47, 49, 95, 100, 138, 272, 378
Mòses, Stéphane 101 n. 156
Mounier, Emmanuel 160
Moylan, Tom 2, 48, 50, 52
Müller, Harro 98 n. 142
Münster, Arno 7 n. 14
Münzer, Thomas xviii, 3 n. 7, 21, 26, 35, 49, 56, 330
Murdoch, Iris 325
Mysticism 1, 5, 49, 61, 163–4, 187–8, 192–4, 216 n. 3, 428
Myth xvii, xix–xx, 24, 26–36, 38, 41–8, 50, 52, 55–6, 57, 62, 65, 70, 72, 78–82, 85–7, 92, 94, 96, 98, 101, 103–5, 132, 143–58, 176, 179, 182, 185, 199, 223, 269, 303–5, 323, 326, 373, 376, 378, 394, 396, 398–404, 408–17, 421, 431, 439–40, 444–5, 447–50

Nägele, Rainer 59 n. 10
Nature 32, 37, 51, 65, 68, 70, 80–1, 93, 96–8, 102–3, 130, 143–5, 147–50, 152–8, 179–80, 183–4, 191, 194, 196, 199, 203, 208, 271, 305, 319 n. 110, 321, 393 n. 4, 398 n. 18, 400–1, 410–12, 414, 421, 425, 433–9, 441, 444 n. 105, 445
Nazism 1, 5, 21 n. 45, 28, 30, 348–9, 399, 435–6
Negri, Antonio 273
Nehemiah 17–19
New historicism 25
Newton, Isaac 129
Nicholas of Cusa 262–3
Nicodemus 203
Nietzsche, Friedrich 43, 58 n. 3, 79, 188, 194

Origen 65
Osborne, John xiii, 102

Paganism 5, 48, 64, 66, 68, 78–9, 96, 103, 195, 205, 377, 379, 403
Pannenberg, Wolfhart 2 n. 2
Pascal, Blaise 135, 136 n. 82, 139–40, 194, 263–5
Paul (St.) xxiii, 17, 21, 26, 289–91, 303–4, 306, 311, 318 n. 106, 319, 336–8, 340, 343–60, 363, 366, 368–77, 379–82, 387, 389, 391, 443–4, 450
Pausanias 78
Pensky, Max 82 n. 89, 392 n. 2
Pepper, Thomas 136 n. 82
Personality cult xxii, 309, 321–4, 394, 433–5, 443, 449
Philip, André 265 n. 114
Pizer, John 61 n. 18, 92 n. 123

Plato 90, 119, 129, 205, 350–1, 356, 400, 416, 436
Political theology xvii–xviii, xxii, 2, 6, 26, 31, 45, 333, 379, 422, 443, 450–1
Postcolonialism 2, 25, 284, 435
Poststructuralism 25, 278
Predestination 194–5, 264, 266, 361–2, 388–9, 418
Pre-Socratics 28
Proletariat 20, 108, 112–18, 122, 126, 129, 182, 232, 284, 312
Prometheus 32, 36
Prophecy 11, 40, 99–100, 319, 369
Prophets 23, 35, 39–40, 45, 49, 100, 115–17, 188, 192, 272, 313
Proselytism xxi, 217, 222, 224, 226–7
Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph 267
Psychoanalysis xxiii, 25, 129, 193, 262, 288–91, 297, 335–6, 339–45, 349–60, 364, 367, 379–80, 383, 389–90, 397, 433

Queer theory 25

Rabinbach, Anson 61 n. 18
Rancière, Jacques 59 n. 8
Rauch, Angelika 93 n. 131
Raulet, Gérard 55 n. 140
Redemption 8, 56, 58, 61 n. 19, 62, 68–9, 95, 101–2, 185, 259, 296, 298–300, 302–6, 308, 313–17, 323, 325, 358, 361, 366, 383, 386–7, 393–4, 396, 400–1, 407, 410–11, 414, 422, 444 n. 105
Reformation xxii–xxiii, 40, 133 n. 71, 193, 216, 218, 245, 248–9, 258–69, 272, 297, 335, 360–2, 364, 372–4, 383, 434, 448
Reification 31, 94, 184–5, 204, 295, 393 n. 4, 407–8, 425, 428, 437–9, 441
Renan, Ernst 46, 259, 267
Resurrection 29, 37–8, 53–4, 64, 69, 203, 205, 281, 302, 304–7, 311, 313, 315, 318, 323, 330, 332, 346–50, 354, 372–3, 401, 404, 428
Revelation 30, 34, 58, 85, 90, 95, 111, 119, 414, 427, 429
Ricci, François 112, 159
Richards, I.A. 276, 278, 325
Ricoeur, Paul 6, 136 n. 82
Rigby, Kate 436 nn. 90–1, 437, 438 n. 96
Roberts, David 53–4
Rochlitz, Rainer 59 n. 10
Rühle, Otto 74 n. 59
Rumpf, Michael 60 n. 11
Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. 136 n. 82, 138 n. 87

Sacrifice 17, 43–4, 136 n. 81, 180, 184, 302, 305, 308, 311, 315–21, 327, 370, 385, 400–1, 409, 412–15, 440
Salvation xxiv, 22, 29, 45, 64, 68, 140, 174, 199, 266, 290–1, 300, 302, 327, 349, 360–2, 364, 369 n. 72, 383, 387–9, 410, 427, 431–2, 442–3, 451
Salvation history xiii, xx, 96–103
Santner, Eric 378–9
Sartre, Jean-Paul 309 n. 85
Satan 8 n. 17, 58, 68, 74, 79, 300, 315–16
Saussure, Ferdinand de 309
Schelling, Friedrich W.J. 289, 380
Schillebeecx, Edward 313
Schmitt, Carl 450–1
Scholem, Gershom 58–61, 393 n. 5
Schweitzer, Albert 35, 313
Segundo, Juan Luis 298
Serpent 19, 22, 32, 39–43, 68, 87, 89, 149–51
Shakespeare, William 68
Shields, Rob 189, 191 n. 68, 192 n. 71, 193 n. 73
Simmel, Georg 96
Sin 31, 42–3, 47, 52, 68, 112–14, 117, 146, 199–200, 265, 287 n. 24, 289–90, 294–301, 306–9, 316–17, 320–1, 350–3, 357, 366, 368–9, 376, 386, 404–6, 409–10, 429, 434, 449
Singh, Sadhu Sundar 222–3
Smith, Geoffrey Nowell 245
Smyth, Gerry 278
Söderblom, Nathan 220–1
Sorel, Georges 267
Space xxi, 37, 103 n. 162, 164, 167–9, 192 n. 71, 200, 204–14, 408, 448, 450
Spinoza, Benedict 19, 134–5, 136 n. 81
Spivak, Gayatri 284
Stalin, Joseph 50, 56, 287, 322, 356
Steinberg, Michael P. 70 n. 47
Stoljar, Margaret M. 93 n. 130
Suardi, Gianforte 241–2
Subjectivity 111–12, 130, 135, 137–43, 290 n. 33, 340–51, 353–5, 361, 372–6, 380, 384, 390, 403, 406, 424, 429, 436, 437 n. 93, 441–2
Surin, Ken 279 n. 9
Swann, J.T. xii–xiii

Taubes, Jacob 450
Technology 72, 81–2, 94, 182
Teleology 47, 50–1, 111, 127, 189–91, 237, 318, 449
Theodicy 4, 48–9, 124, 288, 411
Theological suspicion xxiv, 324, 391, 393–9, 409, 421, 443, 445, 448, 450

Thompson, E.P. 297
Tiedemann, Rolf 60 n. 11, 70 n. 45, 397 n. 15, 398 n. 18, 423 n. 59
Tillich, Paul 2 n. 2, 361, 393, 423–5, 440
Torres, Camilo 331
Transcendence 22, 23–4, 26, 29, 34, 46–7, 51–2, 58, 70, 111, 124–5, 176, 323–4, 409, 411, 419–20, 425, 429, 449, 451
Translation xii–xiii, 84–5, 87, 102, 104, 188, 215, 299, 308
Trotsky 221, 322, 342
Turmel, Joseph 236–7
Tyrell, George 190, 235–6

Ullmann, Wolfgang 61 n. 18
Universalism xx, 61 n. 19, 97–8, 117, 120–1, 123, 128, 141, 143, 174, 193, 215–16, 219, 221, 225, 229–32, 270–2, 274, 281–2, 308–10, 312 n. 94, 318, 326, 347–8, 366, 369, 372–6, 380, 385, 412, 415–7, 422 n. 58, 425, 429, 440–1, 447
Utopia xx, 2 nn. 3–4, 4–5, 7–12, 20, 23–4, 27–8, 32, 36–7, 45, 48–55, 154–5, 157–8, 179–86, 189–90, 193–4, 206, 209, 214, 289, 299, 301, 322, 398 n. 17, 422 n. 58, 432, 444 n. 105, 447–8

Violence 75, 101, 181, 271, 365–6, 371, 385
von Braun, Christina 438–9
von Buelow, Christiane 60 n. 14
von Harnack, Adolf 46, 313
von Hugel, Friedrich 190, 235–6

Waugh, Evelyn 380
Weber, Max 57 n. 1, 92 nn. 122–3, 265–6, 286, 362
Wellhausen, Julius 38 n. 87, 46
Wellmer, Albrecht 422 n. 58, 444
Weigel, Sigrid 92 n. 125, 93 nn. 131–2, 437
Wicker, Brian 329 n. 130
Wilde, Oscar 276
Williams, Raymond 258, 330
Winstanley, Gerard 330
Wittgenstein, Ludwig 309
Wohlfarth, Irving 60 n. 13, 61 nn. 18–19, 62 n. 21
Wolff, Janet 93 n. 130
Wolin, Richard 60 n. 11, 407 n. 32
Women xxi, 62, 72, 92–4, 105, 121–3, 152, 164, 200, 209–13, 251, 286, 288, 433, 435–9, 450
Worship xxi, 8, 43, 124, 142, 166, 170, 177–8, 187, 209–10, 294, 336, 429, 432, 434, 437–8

Yahweh 4, 20–2, 24, 36, 39–44, 46–7, 49, 99–100, 311, 318–19, 431
Yeats, William Butler 8 n. 18

Zarathustra 188
Zedong, Mao 221, 322
Zipes, Jack 56 n. 144
Žižek, Slavoj xv–xviii, xxiii, 27, 48, 214, 276, 279, 289, 291, 297, 302, 335–90, 393, 439, 442–4, 447–51
Contingency, Hegemony, Universality (with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau) xxiii, 335–6, 338–43, 356–7, 365
The Fragile Absolute xvi, xxiii, 336–8, 343, 351, 356–7, 359–60, 364–72, 374, 378, 382–5
On Belief xvi, xxiii, 338, 343, 360, 364–5, 372, 377–82, 385–8
The Puppet and the Dwarf xvi, xxiii, 338, 360, 363–5, 368–70, 372, 378–9, 385, 387–8, 390
The Ticklish Subject 337–8, 342–4, 346–7, 349–50, 353–63, 367, 370–2, 382, 385 n. 113
Zoroaster 45